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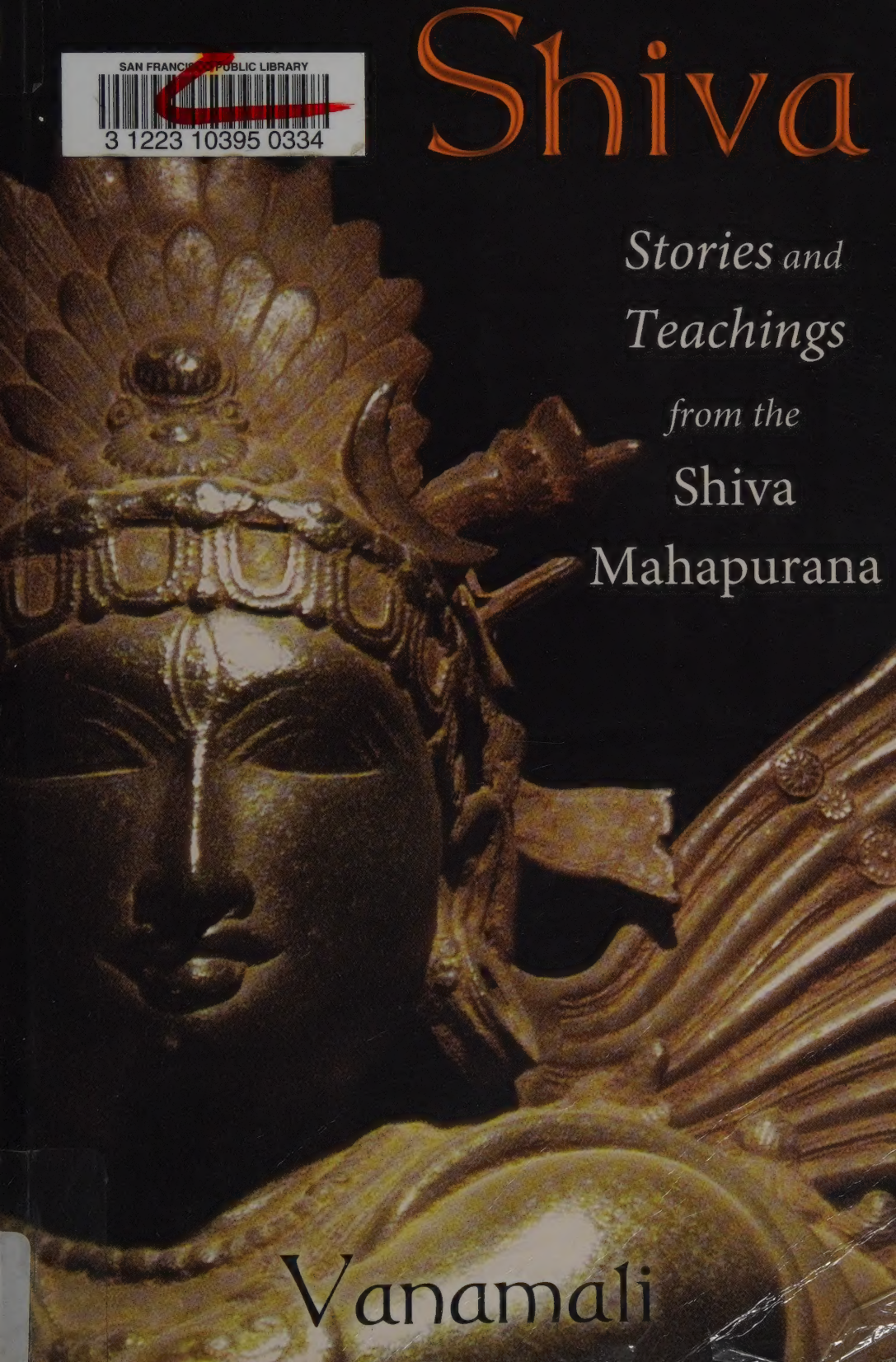
Shiva

Stories and Teachings from the Shiva Mahapurana



Vanamali

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Shiva

Aum Ganeshaya Namaha!

ॐ

Salutations to Lord Ganesha!
Who removes and overcomes all obstacles,
And grants success in every endeavor.

"GANASHTAKAM"

Shiva

Stories and Teachings from the Shiva Mahapurana

Vanamali

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ॐ

Aum Mrityunjayaya Namaha!

The recompense that a son makes to the mother who bore him is to make people exclaim, "What austerities did this man's mother perform to beget such a son!"

Thirukkural by Thiruvalluvar

Dedicated to my beloved son Janardan,
with all my blessings

ॐ

Aum Jagatpitre Namaha!

In youth, the venomous snakes of sound and sight,
Of taste and touch and smell,
Fastened on my vitals and slew my discrimination.
Alas! My heart, bereft of the thought of Shiva,
Swelled in arrogance and pride!
Therefore, O Shiva!
O Mahadeva! O Shambho!
Forgive me, I pray, my transgressions.

Now in my old age, my senses have lost the power
of proper judgment and action.
My body is weak and senile from afflictions,
But even now, my mind, instead of meditating on
Shiva
Runs after vain desire and hollow discussions.
Therefore, O Shiva! O Mahadeva! O Shambho!
Forgive me, I pray, my transgressions.

I bow to Him who bestows on the sages direct
knowledge of ultimate Truth.
I bow to the teacher of the three worlds,
Dakshinamurthy, the Lord Himself,
Who dispels the misery of birth and death.

Adi Shankaracharya

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Aum Shivaya Namaha!

Foreword

The Vedas present the cause of the entire *jagat*—the material world—as Mayin, wielder of *maya,* who does not come under the spell of *maya*, or cosmic illusion. The Mayin is Maheswara—Lord of all. Not only is he the intelligent cause of the *jagat,* but he is also in the form of the *jagat*. Space, time, and everything in space and time are his manifestations and therefore not separate from him. He is therefore both father and mother of the universe. Every form is his form and he can be invoked in any given form. If you look at this Maheswara from the point of view of any manifest force or law, he becomes a *devata* (deity). If you give a name in Sanskrit to this *devata*, the name will be descriptive of the form. Thus the name Vishnu means that the Lord is all-pervasive. The name Brahma means the one who is infinite and all-embracing. The name Rudra means the one who is the cause of tears, in that he causes actions to bear fruit, and also the one who removes all tears. In any of the names and forms of worship, you can invoke the Maheswara as the one who is the cause of manifestation, sustenance, and dissolution.

In the *Shiva Purana** the whole *lila* (play) of Maheswara is presented in a style that offers readers a scope to explore and discover—one gets to know what it takes to be almighty. An insight into every virtue in its infinite measure is unavoidable as one goes through any

**Shiva Purana* is a shortened form of *Shiva Mahapurana* and refers to the same work.

Purana. The author, Vanamali, presents the Lord as one who is invoked as Shiva, as depicted in the *Shiva Purana*. The author's devotion to the Lord imbues her pen with facility of expression, helping the reader to discover the glories of the Lord and inspiring devotion. As the author is a recipient of the Lord's blessings, and by using these blessings to present the glories of the Lord, she once again receives the Lord's blessings in abundance.

Swami Dayananda
Dayananda Ashrama
Rishikesh

Aum Namashivaya!

ॐ

ॐ

Aum Panchavaktraya Namaha!

Introduction

Trayambakam yajamahe sugandhim pushtivardhanam,
Urvarukamiva bandanath, Mrityor mukshiya-mamritath.

I worship the fragrant, three-eyed one in hopes of being granted perfect health, release from the coils of mortality as effortlessly as a ripe gourd falls from its stalk, and immortality.

Yajur Veda

Puranic literature springs from a deep need in the heart of the human being for fulfillment. It plumbs the depths of our psyche, which cradles an unconscious and indescribable longing for the Supreme, and reveals the most fantastic images and concepts that have baffled the mind of contemporary man. Those who have been brainwashed by modern scientific preconceptions, whose imaginations have been stifled by strict adherence to a truth limited by what the senses can perceive, may find it difficult to read the Puranas and understand their deep insight into human nature. But those whose intellects have not been stunted by such constricting notions will delight in the absolute freedom of expression and amazing flights of imagination to which the human mind can soar. What must be remembered is that the forms of the gods are not mere flights of fancy, but are meant to reveal the many facets of truth that are

not perceivable to the five senses. These five senses are limited at best and deceitful at worst, for their primary aim is to conceal a truth that is incomprehensible to them. The modern worldview knows only heat and motion—energy that burst forth in the Big Bang some fourteen billion years ago and expanded into a system of galaxies that are disintegrating from a state of maximum heat and concentration to a state of cold stillness and fragmentation over a vast period of time. Life and consciousness—which has no special significance in this view of the cosmos—are secondary phenomena that will pass into the cold ambiguity of death in this meaningless dance of the elements. The scientific outlook is quite skeptical about ultimate values. There is no purpose, no plan in the universe, and intelligence itself is only a by-product of matter, condemned to perish over the course of time. For one who is convinced of this view, the Puranas will be only a source of amusement, because what modern mind can believe in oceans of milk and five-headed gods?

The Puranic view of creation, unlike the modern scientific view, has its basis in the will of the Supreme Being. The ancient sages, or *rishis,* of India knew that matter is only a derivative of consciousness and contains within it the fundamental knowledge, or seed, of its own inner spiritual potency, just as the whole of the mighty banyan tree is contained in its tiny mustardlike seed. There is an invisible field of energy that precedes and underlies all that we can see. The entire field of visible objects is only a projection of this energy, which is unmanifest and not within the grasp of our five senses. The *rishis* were well aware of this. Lord Krishna calls this field *avyaktha,* or the Unmanifest from which all manifestation has sprung.

Beyond even *avyaktha* is the vast field called *chidakasha,* or the field of consciousness that has the power to create. This field is also called Shakti, or the creative aspect of the Divine. It is the feminine principle that is capable of all action and creation, hence it is known as the Divine Mother. The universe and all the phenomena of material life cannot really be called a creation, but a projection of the Divine Consciousness that appears inert, but which is actually pulsating with

life. The creation is not a creation by someone of something out of nothing, but a projection of that which has eternally existed. Science may have discovered many physical and chemical laws that govern the universe, but it has yet to discover those transcendental laws that are fundamental to it. These eternal spiritual laws are inherent in nature.

Based on a cyclical conception of time, Puranic history has a much wider scope than our limited concept of human history. Modern history, being linear, has no idea of where and when the line started and where it might end. What was there before the beginning, and what will come after the end? These are questions the modern historian cannot answer. Only the unthinking mind will be satisfied with such a concept of history. The Puranas, however, give us cosmic history. An intelligent reading of them enlarges our vision and gives us a totally new understanding of the history of the universe. We become aware that the history of the human being is not as simple or as short as modern historians would have us believe. Science fiction author H. G. Wells, who was quite Puranic in his thinking, wrote, "Amongst the ancient people, the Indian philosopher alone seems to have some perception of the vast ages through which existence seems to have passed."

The modern concept of history may have something meaningful to say about the recent past of *Homo sapiens,* but it can throw no light on our distant past, our future, or our significance in cosmic history. The Puranas, on the other hand, give the right interpretation of the human being as comprised of consciousness evolving toward higher levels of perfection that will be shared with other intelligent and conscious beings. It raises the history of man from a meaningless episode in the infinity of time to a meaningful progression from man to god. The Puranas are based on the intuitions, inspirations, and revelations of the enlightened sages of ancient India, and thus have more value culturally and spiritually than copperplate inscriptions and stone tablets. Modern history has no spiritual value. Puranic history, on the other hand, is based on the intangible verities of life that will lead us to the best and highest spiritual core within us. The Hindu deities, such as

Shiva, Vishnu, and Shakti, never had a location in earthly space and time, except in images. But they are spiritual verities—manifestations of the Supreme Being. Material objects are mere shadows compared to these.

"In whatsoever way a man approaches me, so shall I approach him," is what Lord Krishna says in the *Sreemad Bhagavad Gita*. God is willing and capable of molding himself into whatever form his devotee imagines him to be. Here there is no question of whether something or someone has taken place in a particular form, at a particular place, in a particular moment in time. Faith transcends the bonds of time and space, and the Infinite Being is capable of molding himself into infinite forms to delight the hearts of his devotees. To limit him to one form and one mold is to set boundaries to his infinity and omnipotence. Just as the great rivers, mountains, and oceans of this country are an expression of the natural forces working from within the earth, so also our Puranas are expressions of the Indian mind that saw in the most trivial incident an expression of the immense variety of the Supreme. The Puranas seek to give a meaningful interpretation of the omniscience and omnipotence of the Supreme Being, a loving, spiritual reality who can be communed with, prayed to, and visualized in various forms of spiritual glory. Thus the Puranas provide valuable glimpses of eternal truths that transcend the scope of modern history.

The forms of the various gods are really condensed books of spiritual wisdom. The seers, or sages, of the Puranas who saw these forms were actually scientists of a high order whose investigations were not limited by their preconceptions. To consider their findings as childish nonsense, fit for the ignorant, is the same as considering algebraic symbols to be the scribbling of a lunatic. No other literature in the world has succeeded as well as the Puranas in making the formless God into a tangible reality, using vivid and realistic descriptions.

Modern physics has blasted the theory that matter is static and inert. The atom was discovered to be not a solid block, but a nucleus of empty space surrounded by whirling energy particles. Even these par-

ticles were found to be not things, but interconnections between other things. Quantum physics thus reveals a basic oneness of the universe: We cannot decompose the world into independently existing small units. The more we penetrate into matter, the more we realize that it is a complicated web of relationships among the various parts of a unified whole. This network of relationships is intrinsically dynamic and not static; it is always in a state of motion. This is very similar to the Indian concept of matter, which states that matter must be understood as having dynamic equilibrium. The seers understood this perfectly and tried to bring it forcibly into the minds of lay people by means of vivid descriptions of the gods and their interactions with the world. Very often these ideas would be given graphic form, as in the case of the dancing Shiva, which depicts the dance of creation and destruction that goes on all the time.

The Vedas speak of the Supreme as Brahman, who is the Absolute in its unmanifest, formless aspect. The Puranas, however, bring the indescribable glory of the Absolute into the din and clamor of this earthly existence by giving it a million forms and names. The rightness or wrongness of such an experiment is not the question here, but whether it has any utilitarian value. The mind of the human being is incapable of visualizing the formless and the unmanifest; it is not accustomed to thinking in abstractions. Some path, some way, however strange, had to be devised to reveal a path to the infinite, formless Absolute. The ancient *rishis* of the Puranas found such a way in the creation of the gods. The Divine in its multifarious forms has become a living reality in the minds of the Hindus by the depiction of the gods as given by the sages. Who is to say with absolute certainty what is real and what unreal? Einstein's theory of relativity—that everything in the world is relative and nothing is absolute—shattered the Copernican theory that matter alone is real. The sages of the Upanishads said the same thing in a different way: They said that the Absolute alone is real and everything else is relative. The mind has a thousand mansions, and each of these has its own reality. In every state of consciousness—waking, dreaming,

and deep sleep—our experience of reality is totally different, just as the biologist sees a completely different view of reality when examining a leaf under a microscope. The *rishis* of the Puranas in their heightened states of awareness discovered many, many gods and their forms, each of which is only a pointer to the supreme reality. The names of the gods are all *mantras,* or special sounds that give clues to their forms. Each of these forms and names has a particular part to play in the spiritual evolution of humankind. Each Purana speaks of the Bhagavan, the supreme person, but each Purana calls him by a different name. This is because the Bhagavan is not an individual but an archetype, capable of taking on any form used in invocation. An anthropomorphic veneer is necessary to accommodate the highest and most idealistic concept that the human mind is able to conceive. In this way, the seer saw to it that no fixed form was given to that Absolute, for he/she is formless. The great sage Vyasa wrote all of the eighteen Puranas, but in each of them he extolled that particular deity alone as being Supreme. In the *Bhagavata Purana,* Krishna is the Supreme incarnate. In the *Devi Purana,* the goddess is the Supreme incarnate. In the *Shiva Purana*, it is Shiva who is the Supreme. Thus the mind is conditioned to realize that the Supreme, being formless, is capable of taking any form and any of these forms can take us to the ultimate truth. Thus the great efficacy of Puranic literature allows the human mind to make the quantum leap from form to formless. It does this by shaking up our usual human conceptions and propelling us to the unknown via a vast array of symbols and strange descriptions. Like the Buddhist koans, which defy our usual concepts and activate us to think in a different fashion, so also the forms of the gods defy the norms of common thought and impel us to leap into the unknown and discover the reality underlying this amazing array of mind-boggling descriptions. This creates a tremendous impact of divine consciousness on the mind.

The ancients saw that just as the sun, moon, and planets weave intricate patterns in the sky, they also weave the same intricate patterns in the tissues of our bodies and the fabric of our minds. In this way they discovered the science of astrology, to show how the planets rule

our physical and psychic bodies. So also within us are all the gods, and it is because of their existence that the slightest movements of our bodies and reflexes are implemented. These gods can heal both body and soul. All philosophy and art, and even all scientific knowledge, must be based on knowledge of these gods, who form the energy particles of the spiritual field that was known to the ancient seers. They had knowledge of past and future because of their intimate connection with these gods, and therefore they knew the secret of molding human life into a living, spiritual present. The modern sceintific mind has forgotten this path and is no longer able to commune with these vibrating gods of the universe; this is the cause of our deep-rooted unrest and anxiety despite all the comforts rendered by science. Modern science has provided us a wonderfully fashioned and comfortable chair, but the floor on which the chair rests is shaky, so how can we relax comfortably on it? Consciousness alone is the foundation of all existence, and the gods are the spiritual essences that comprise it. It is only by discovering these gods within ourselves that we will be able to see this fabric of the universe as a divine tapestry, on which is woven the constellation of life.

*Panchakshari Stotram**

Nagendraharaya Trilochanaya, bhasmangaragaya
Maheswaraya, Nityaya Shuddhaya
digambaraya,
Tasmai nakaraya, Namashivaya!

**Panchakshari* means "five-syllabled *mantra* of Shiva" because it has five letters—na-ma-shi-va-ya. *Stotram* means "hymn." In this hymn, a small verse is based upon each letter of the five-syllabled *mantra*. This is the most popular hymn to Shiva. It is quite difficult to translate literally because of the plays on words in the original Sanskrit verses, but I have done my best to elucidate the meaning of each verse in English following the Sanskrit transliteration. Each verse begins with the letter it is trying to emphasize. For example, the first verse opens with *nagendraharaya,* which begins with "na." The next letter in the *mantra* is "ma," so the next verse begins with *mandakini,* and so forth.

He who wears the snake as a necklace, he who has three eyes, who is smeared with ashes, who is ever pure and sky clad, who is the Lord of All, to him, the *mantra* Namashivaya, which starts with the letter "na."

Mandakini salila chandana charchitaya,
nandiswara pramatha natha
Maheswaraya,
Mandarapushpa bahupushpa supuchitaya,
Tasmai makaraya Namashivaya!

He who is anointed with the sandal powder, wetted with the water of the Mandakini river, he the Lord of All,who has the bull Nandi as his foremost servitor, who is offered worship with the white Mandara flowers, to him, the *mantra* Namashivaya, of which the second letter is "ma."

Shivaya Gauri vadanabja vrinda-suryaya
dakshadwaranashakaya, SriNeelakantaya
vrishadwajaya,
Tasmai shikaraya namasivaya!

The blue-throated one who sits on his bull vehicle along with his consort Gauri, who destroyed the yaga of Daksha, to him, the *mantra* Namashivaya, of which the third letter is "shi."

Vasishtakumbhodbhava Gautamarya, munindra
devarchita shekharaya, Chandrarka
vaishwanara lochanaya,
Tasmai vakaraya Namashivaya!

He whose three eyes are the sun, moon, and fire, who is worshipped by the great sages, like Vasishta, Gautama and many others, to him, the *mantra* Namashivaya, of which the fourth letter is "va."

Yajnaswaroopaya jatadharaya, pinakahastaya
sanatanaya, Divyaya devaya digambaraya,
Tasmai yakaraya Namashivaya!

The ancient divine, sky-clad god who is the very form of all sacrifices, with matted hair, wielding the bow, to him, the *mantra* Namashivaya, of which the fifth letter is "ya."

Panchaksharamidam punyam ya padeth Shiva
sannidhau, Shivalokamavapnothi Shivena
saha modate.

If this most holy five-lettered *mantra* of Shiva is chanted in his presence, he will be very pleased and will take the devotee to his divine abode.

Aum Namashivaya!

ॐ

ॐ

Aum Sri Gurave Namaha!

Invocation to the Supreme Guru

Guru Brahma, Guru Vishnu, Guru Devo
Maheswara!
Guru Sakshatha Param Brahma, Tasmai Sri
Guruva Namaha!

The Guru is none other than
Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva!
The Guru is verily the Parabrahman itself.
To that divine Guru do I make my prostrations!

Gurave sarva lokanam,
Bhishaje bhavaroginam,
Nidhaye sarvavidhyanam,
Dakshinamurthaye Namaha!

I bow to Lord Dakshinamurthy, preceptor of the whole universe, Who removes the ills of mortal existence and confers supreme wisdom.

"Dakshinamurthy Stotram"
Adi Shankara

ॐ

Aum Giripriyaya Namaha!

PART ONE

The Divine Aspects of Shiva

Karana charana kritam vaak kaayajam karmajam va.
Shravana nayanajam va manasam vaparardham,
Vihitamavihitam va sarvametath kshamasva,
Jaya Jaya karunabdhe Sri Mahadeva Shambo!

Hail to thee O Mahadeva! Thou art the ocean of compassion!
Pray forgive me for whatever wrong actions I may have done, either knowingly or unknowingly,
Through the organs of my action and perception, or through my mind.

"Shiva Stotram," hymn to Shiva

ॐ

Aum Mahadevaya Namaha!

1

The Great Universal God

Behold Him,
With a rolled palmyra leaf stuck into His earlobe,
The rider on the bull,
The wearer of the pure white moon on His locks,
Smeared with hot ashes from the cremation ground,
The stealer of my heart . . .

SAINT SAMBANDAR

In the bewildering galaxy of gods of the Hindu pantheon, Lord Shiva stands out as one of the oldest and best loved. He is as old as the Indian culture, perhaps even older. At the time of the cosmic dawn, before the creation of man, he appeared as the divine archer, pointing with his arrow to the unrevealed Absolute. The world is his hunting ground. The universe resounds with his presence. He is both sound and echo. He is intangible vibration as well as infinitesimal substance. He is the rustling of the withered leaves and the glossy green of the newborn grass. He is the ferryman who ferries us from life to death, but he is also the liberator from death to immortality. He has innumerable faces and eleven forms as described in the Vedas. The sky and the seasons vibrate with his intensity and power. He grips, supports, releases, and

liberates. He is both the disease and the destroyer of the disease. He is food, the giver of food, and the process of eating. His divine majesty and power are depicted through symbolic, yet highly realistic descriptions of an awe-inspiring figure, far, distant, and cold in his remote Himalayan fastness as well as close, kind, and loving, a living, throbbing symbol of the Divine.

He was worshipped as the divine shaman by wild tribes that roamed across the subcontinent before the dawn of history. They contacted him by the use of certain psychoactive compounds and various esoteric rituals. Later we see him on the terra-cotta seals of the Indus civilization. There he is shown as Pasupati, Lord of beasts, surrounded by the wild creatures of the jungle. He is also shown as the yogi sitting in various meditative postures. The *rishis* of the Vedas looked up at the Himalayas and saw in them his hair; they found his breath in the air, and all creation and destruction in his dance—the Thandava Nritta. The Rig Veda, the oldest religious text known to humankind, refers to him as Rudra, the wild one, who dwelt in fearful places and shot arrows of disease. Sacrifices were constantly offered to appease him.

At that time religion was dominated by female deities, so the cult of Shiva soon fused with that of the great Mother Goddess Shakti, who later came to be known as Durga, Uma, Parvati, and so on. Male and female are but complementary halves of the whole truth, and some images portray Shiva as Ardhanareeswara, a form half male and half female.

He is also mentioned as Iswara, the enigmatic first emanation from the Brahman. Thus he is the Great Lord, Maheswara, and the Great God, Mahadeva. He is one of the Immortals, Unborn and Deathless. The *Shiva Purana* equates him with the Supreme Brahman of the Vedas.

He is also the endearing personal god, Shambunatha, and the innocent Bhola with a naive nature. On the other hand he is Dakshinamurthy, the supreme teacher who gave the teachings of the Vedas, the Shastras, and the Tantras to the *rishis*. He is also master of every art,

the supreme dancer, Nataraja, the supreme musician, composer of the *Sama Veda*. Though normally pictured in his fierce aspect, he can also take the form of Sundaramurti, the handsome one, and entrance anyone. To the wicked he is Bhairava, or Rudra of fierce aspect. Depending on the needs of the devotees he is capable of taking on many forms.

His forms, attributes, decorations, weapons, attendants, and activities are given in great detail so that he becomes a living reality. As Rudra he is full of wrath and destruction, but as Shiva he is filled with all auspiciousness. He has two natures—one wild and fierce, the other calm and peaceful. Of all the deities, he is the one most easily propitiated. Moreover, in compassion there is none to compare with him. He is the friend of the unfortunates—the blind and the lame, the goblins and the ghouls. Those who are despised by others find a place in his entourage. Demons, vampires, ghosts, and goblins who are feared by all are his close attendants. Snakes, which usually people dread and run from in horror, wind themselves lovingly round his neck. His companions are the deformed and the ugly; he is averse to none. He does not belong exclusively to the gods or the sages. His greatest devotees are Kubera, king of the *yakshas* (demigods who guard the treasures of the netherworld); Ravana, king of the *rakshasas* (demons); and Shukra, *guru* of the *asuras*. Wizards, sorcerers, witches, and magicians also worship him. Every spirit, malefic or compassionate, seeks Shiva's grace. His attendants are the *ganas,* a wild bunch of hooligans and social misfits. They are ugly, deformed, and misshapen. They drink intoxicating liquor and take drugs such as *bhang* (a cannabis preparation). They are a totally lawless set of beings that only Shiva can control. Instead of curbing their eccentricities, Shiva joins in their wild revelries and sings and dances with gusto to the accompaniment of their cacophonous music. But he also keeps them in check. Because of him they are forced to desist from doing too much damage in the world. He is the supreme yogi, uncaring of material wants, ever immersed in the immensity of his divine bliss. Death stands in dread of him and the word *inauspicious* does not exist in his dictionary. Bedecked with

skulls and bones, Shiva wanders in cremation grounds dancing to the light of funeral pyres, smearing his body with the ashes of the dead. Dangerous forests infested with cannibals and wild beasts, as well as the icy, inaccessible peaks of the Himalayas, are his favorite haunts. In the forests he is adored by the wild tribes as Kirata, the hunter. Shiva means the auspicious one, yet everything about him seems inauspicious. He dwells in dark and gloomy caves and jungles and dances in cemeteries lit by the fire of burning pyres, rattling skulls, and drums. He smears himself with ash from these pyres, drinks poison and smokes narcotics, and enjoys the company of ghosts, ghouls, and goblins. The unorthodox and the casteless, outside the traditional fold, saw in him the nonconformist who sought ultimate truth beyond ritual, beyond society, beyond matter. He was the first *tantric* (follower of Tantra), as well as the first *siddha* (one with supernormal powers). The casteless ones sought his blessings before dabbling in their magic rites, their sorcery, and their alchemy.

The Brahmins, who were the orthodox priest caste, thus found it difficult to accept this wild and fearsome god. As the priest-king Daksha did, they held him in contempt. They refused to offer him any portion of their *yajnas,* or sacrifices, given to the other gods. The story of the Daksha *yaga* (*yajna*) shows how by the sheer power of his truth, which is the truth of all creation, Shiva came to be accepted as the Great God. He transcends the duality of good and evil, right and wrong, auspicious and inauspicious. The *Sanatana Dharma,* which is the actual name of Hinduism, forces the human mind, time and time again, to accept the fact that the Divine is all that exists, both clean and unclean, pure and impure, auspicious and inauspicious. The same code that gave us the caste system also gave us the image of Shiva, the nonconformist, who challenged all social codes and sought a truth that lay beyond all apparent dualities. There is nothing and no person who can be said to be unacceptable to society. The Divine accepts every creature, however ugly or malformed. All the rites and rituals that are employed by the human being groping a path to godhead have to be

accepted by the Divine, for that also comes from him alone. Shiva is a symbol of this all-inclusive universality of the Hindu view of the deity, thus the Brahmins were forced to accept him into the fold of their conservative beliefs. By the time the Upanishads were written, Shiva had become a most important deity. Although initially considered to be inauspicious and impure, he eventually came to be known as Shiva, the auspicious one. He became the inspiration for theatre, dance, and drama and was a favorite figure for painters and sculptors.

In the Hindu trinity, or Trimurtis, Brahma is the Creator; Vishnu, the Sustainer; and Shiva is the Destroyer. The divine trinity thus ensures the cycle of existence. The Shaiva Siddhanta School of philosophy, however, does not accept Shiva as being just one of the Trimurtis. To them he is the Supreme Brahman to whom both Brahma and Vishnu offer obeisance. He is called Pati, or Master, with the five important functions of godhead: creation, maintenance, destruction, veiling, and grace. The human soul is called *pasu,* or creature, which is tied with the *pasa,* or rope of bondage. This bondage consists of three types of impurities: The first is *avidya,* or primordial ignorance. Next comes *karma mala,* the bondage accruing from our actions. Last is *maya mala,* or impurity caused by attachment to the world of *maya.*

To eliminate the last two impurities, four types of approaches are prescribed: The first is the way of the servant, or *dasa marga*. This consists of performing external acts of worship, such as gathering flowers for worship, cleaning the vessels used in worship, sweeping the temple, and so on. This leads to *salokya,* which means the devotee will be taken to the abode of Shiva at the time of death and reside there forever. The second way consists of intimate service to God by conducting rituals, having intimate communion with him, speaking about him, writing about him, and so on. This is called the *satputra marga,* or the path of the good son. This leads the devotee to *samipya,* or close proximity to God. The third way is called *sakhya marga,* or the path of friendship, and includes internal worship, such as meditation and communion, which leads to *sarupya;* in this the devotee attains the form of the deity

at the time of death. The last is *jnana marga,* or the path of wisdom; by following this, the devotee attains *sayujya,* or union with God.

As said before, these disciplines can remove only the first two impurities caused by action and attachment to the world—*karma mala* and *maya mala*. The bondage of ignorance, or *avidya,* can be removed only by the grace of God. Thus Shiva is known as Pasupati, or the Lord of all human creatures who are bound by these impurities. Shiva accepts all those who are despised and rejected by others. He destroys the negativity in all and purifies them. He is the regenerator and reformer. He destroys pomposity by his simplicity and prudery by his defiance of orthodoxy. He is the destroyer of the ego, which is what traps the human being in the ocean of life and death. He can also destroy sorrow, pain, and misery. Though he seems a fearsome figure, he is the one who can remove all the fearful influences that threaten our lives. Just as the lotus, rising from the slime of the pond, is still the symbol of purity, so Shiva is the symbol of purity despite dabbling in impurity.

His physical body, clothing, and ornaments are also unique. He is white as camphor and wears his hair in matted locks, coiled in the shape of a shell. He has a blue neck because he drank deadly poison in order to protect the world from it, keeping it in his throat rather than swallowing it, and it made his neck turn blue. He has three eyes. The third eye on his forehead denotes him as the Lord of yoga. This inner eye distinguishes truth from illusion and conquers lust. He is Chandrachuda (wearer of the moon), for he wears the crescent moon as an adornment for his hair. Like the waxing and waning of the moon, he is in tune with the rise and fall of the cosmic rhythm. He is Krittivasa, wearer of animal hides. His upper body is covered with the skin of the black antelope, the elephant hide covers his loins, and the tiger skin is his seat. By wearing the male *kundala* (a man's earring) in his right ear and the female *tatanka* (a woman's earring) in his left, he reveals his androgynous nature. He wears a garland of skulls and carries a skull in his hand as his begging bowl, and often drinks out of it in order to show the frailty of mortal life. He also bedecks himself with *rudraksha* beads, seeds from a medicinal tree. His vehicle is the bull Nandi,

which represents restrained power. The bull also represents *dharma,* or righteousness. In his right hand he holds the antelope representing all creatures under his protection. Verminous mongrel dogs scorned by all chase after him in his wanderings. Snakes slither up and down his body. His weapon is the trident, with three prongs representing the trinity. He also carries a staff and a noose—the *pasa* that binds all creatures to mortality. His two bows are known as Pinaka and Ajagava. He is the source of the primeval sound, *aum,* and carries his drum, *damaru,* while dancing. The boom of the drum represents the vibrations of cosmic energy. He is the master of music and plays on the *rudravina,* or lute, designed for him by Ravana. He also carries a bell. He is prepared to make enormous sacrifices for the protection of the world. Though depicted in the trinity as the Destroyer, he is the one who protected the world by swallowing the dreaded poison that the serpent expelled. He is the one who contained the fall of the divine River Ganga when she tumbled down to earth from heaven, thus saving the earth from being deluged by her waters. There is no end to his mercy and his kindness; he is prepared to sacrifice himself for the sake of the world.

Modern physics describes matter not as passive and inert, but as continuously dancing and vibrating. Physicists speak of the continuous dance of subatomic particles and use the words "dance of creation" and "energy dance." When we look at a sculpture of the dancing Shiva, the Nataraja, this description of the physicists comes forcibly to mind. The Nataraja is the personification of this cosmic dance. Modern photographic techniques have been able to project the particle tracks emanating from the dancing image of Shiva. This image is a concrete symbol of the great principle that the seers tried to portray—that life is a rhythmic interplay of birth and death, creation and destruction. Scientists have shown this in their particle accelerators. Shiva's cosmic dance depicts the mad gyrations of energy particles. His *damaru* beats to the rhythm of the cosmic vibrations, and his energy, or *shakti,* is activated by the Divine Mother, personified by many goddesses in the Hindu pantheon, including Durga and Parvati. The Divine Mother is

the enchantress who creates and nourishes and gives suck to all beings, human and subhuman. All are infants of this Divine Mother.

The Greeks who came to India around 300 BC saw in Shiva a reflection of their own god, Dionysius. He was the rebel who opposed their classical divinities and sought salvation in esoteric rituals. By the time of the Christian era, the cult of Shiva had captured the minds of all and had spread from Kashmir in the north to Kanyakumari at the very tip of the Indian subcontinent. Now we will look at how the concept of Shiva is dealt with in Puranic literature.

> *O head of mine, bow down to the Head (of the universe) who wears a crown of heads on his head. Who receives alms in a skull, O head of mine! Bow down to him!*
>
> Saint Appar

> *O Destroyer! By that supremely peaceful form of yours, which is auspicious and blissful and destroys sin, give us the knowledge supreme.*
>
> "Sri Rudrum," *Yajur Veda*

Aum Namashivaya!

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Aum Maheshwaraya Namaha!

2
Creation

Salutations to the Supreme Person, the boundless Being who wields His triune power for the purpose of creation, preservation, and dissolution, the indwelling Spirit within all beings and the unseen director of everything.

"Sri Shuka" in the *Sreemad Bhagavatham*
(story of Krishna)

It was Mahapralaya—the night of Brahma when nothing existed. There was neither night nor day, no light or darkness, neither joy nor sorrow. All animate and inanimate creation had merged into the infinite essence. There was neither sun, nor moon, nor planets. The whole firmament was one complete void, pulsating with life.

That alone existed. That which the Vedas call Brahman, the One without a second. That One alone existed—the one Existence, the one Consciousness, the one Bliss—Satchidananda. It is incomprehensible by the mind. It has neither beginning nor end. It has no second. It has no decrease or development. It is immeasurable, changeless, formless, and without attributes. It is the all-pervasive sole cause of the changing universe, filled with forms. That alone existed, and that alone exists.

That is the only reality; all else is *mythya,* or illusion. In the course of its own sport, or *lila,* it emanated out of itself an auspicious form of its own, endowed with all power, qualities, and knowledge. This was the form of Iswara. It is the form of pure *sattva* (harmony, essence) undiluted by *rajas* and *tamas* (*gunas,* or fundamental attributes of activity and inertia). It is a form that can go everywhere and take on all forms. It sees all and is the cause of all, and it sanctifies everything.

In the Puranas, creation is cyclic in nature. A vast period of *shrishti,* or creation, is followed by another vast period of *pralaya,* or dissolution. There is no absolute beginning for creation, and thus no absolute end. Time is, therefore, not linear as in modern thought, but cyclic. Brahma is the creative aspect of the Supreme Being. It is he who conducts the work of creation. Shiva is known as the destructive aspect of that same consciousness, and Vishnu is the harmonizer who keeps the balance and sustains creation. A cycle of the creative activity of Brahma is only one day of Brahma, and an equally long cycle constitutes his night. The immensity of Brahma's life span can be imagined only if we convert it into human years. One human year of 365 days corresponds to just one day of the gods. So 365 human years is only one year for the gods. Twelve thousand such celestial years make one *chaturyuga,* or the four *yugas* (epochs) into which cyclic time is divided. One thousand such *chaturyugas* constitute one day of Brahma, and an equal number make his night. Each cycle of creation has its own Brahma, whose total life span is one hundred such years. The immensity of the period of time involved, in human calculations, cannot be imagined. It will come to forty billion plus 311 human years. The human mind can scarcely imagine the period of Brahma's life. A cycle of creation is only one day to Brahma, and of dissolution, his one night. The inherent tendencies generated by the *jivas* (embodied souls) in one cycle remain latent during his night and return to that *avyaktha* from which they have come, and sprout into existence at the commencement of his day.

In every cycle of creation it is time that commences the act of creation. The first principle to be manifested is the Lord's power, as

time. In itself, time is without any modification. It is insubstantial and without beginning or end. It gets its expression at the beginning of creation when it causes the stirring of the three *gunas—sattva, rajas,* and *tamas*—or modes of Prakriti, or nature. Time is the basis of the sport of the Supreme for his creative manifestations. It is without beginning and without end. A period of evolution is followed by a period of involution, called *pralaya,* in which all things remain in a latent state. At the end of one cosmic cycle, the Lord's power of illusion, *maya,* withdraws all things into itself. At the commencement of a new cycle of evolution, the Lord's power as time starts a new process by which all things come into existence once again. During *pralaya* the universe is in a state of latency, and after *pralaya* it is in a state of manifestation. This is all a play of the Supreme Lord.

The dissolution of the universe takes three forms based on time, substance, and the attributes of Prakriti. The first is called *nitya-pralaya,* which is a daily dissolution based only on time, experienced every day by all of us when we go to sleep. Each night is a *pralaya* for each individual soul. When we sleep there is no world and no individuality; both are in a latent state, submerged into consciousness. The moment someone awakes, the world appears and individuality reasserts itself.

The second type of dissolution is called *naimittika-pralaya,* or Mahapralaya, which is the night of Brahma, when the Creator, Brahma, goes to sleep. This happens after one day of Brahma's time, which lasts for a thousand *chaturyugas.* In the night of Brahma the Creator sleeps for another thousand *chatturyugas* and the whole universe goes into a state of involution up to Satyaloka, or the highest heaven (world of Brahma). After this cosmic night is over, the Lord's power begins to operate as time, and creation and evolution continue as described at the beginning of this chapter.

The third type of dissolution is called *prakritika-pralaya,* when all the categories and attributes of Prakriti go into total dissolution into their ultimate cause, Prakriti, which itself reverts into the Iswara and then into the Brahman. This will last for eons, with all things remain-

ing in a latent state. When creation begins once again, all things come out in reverse order. By the fiat of the Absolute, as mentioned earlier, the first to appear is the Lord's power as time. It stirs the *gunas* of Prakriti at the beginning of each creative cycle. Next, out of the cosmic womb of Prakriti comes the cosmic *ahamkara,* or cosmic ego, which splits into the three *gunas.* The third aspect is the appearance of the *tanmatras,* or the subtle energy of the elements, which are capable of evolving into the *bhutas,* or gross elements. The fourth aspect of creation is the projection of the ten *indriyas*—the five organs of knowledge and the five organs of action. The fifth is the formation of the mind and the presiding deities of the organs, all from the *guna* of *sattva.* The sixth is the creation of *avidya,* or ignorance, which clouds and distorts the minds of living beings.

In his sportive manifestation, Iswara assumes the limitation of *rajas* and creates, in the form of the Creator, Brahma. From then on it is Brahma who creates all things. In the seventh aspect of creation Brahma brings into existence the six types of unmoving beings. These are plants that bear fruit without flowering, vegetation that is destroyed when the fruits are destroyed, creepers that climb when supported, the grass family (including bamboo), shrubs that stand without support, and trees with flowers and fruit. Their common characteristics are that they appear insentient but have internal reactions, they come in infinite varieties, and they draw nourishment upward from the roots.

The eighth creation is that of beasts. *Tamas* is predominant in beasts so they do not think of the morrow and are interested only in food and other physical needs. Their sense of smell is acute. They are without reasoning capacity. There are twenty-eight categories of such species moving on the earth, and twenty-eight flying in the sky.

The ninth creation is that of the human species. Humans are dominated by the *guna* of *rajas* and are compelled to act through desire.

Next comes the creation of the gods, or superhuman beings, who are eight in number. Brahma brings into existence these four types of creation at the commencement of every cosmic cycle of creation. The

universe existed as it is now even before each *pralaya* and will continue to exist as it is now after each *pralaya*. During *pralaya* it is in a latent state, and after *pralaya* it is in a manifested state; that is the only difference.

The Supreme Purusha is known as Sadashiva, according to the *Shiva Purana*. He is the Iswara, or supreme embodiment of the godhead, and is of pure *sattvic* form. Together with his Shakti, or the feminine principle within himself, he decided to create a third one, in order to enjoy the bliss of his own Being. In the nectarine essence of the ocean of his mind, where thoughts were the waves, where *sattva* was a precious gem, where *rajas* was the coral and *tamas* the crocodile, there appeared the most charming of all persons, who appeared to be a veritable ocean of immeasurable majesty. He had the luster of a blue sapphire. His glorious eyes were like the newly opened petals of a lotus and were filled with love. He wore silk garments that were golden in color, and he had infinite patience and love.

In a golden, mellifluous voice he asked, "What is my name and my task?" Iswara answered, "As you are all-pervasive and all-expansive, you will be known as Vishnu. You will have many other names as well. By the performance of *tapasya* (practice of austerities, including meditation) you will acquire all knowledge."

Then Vishnu performed severe penance for a thousand celestial years and from his body, water currents of various types began to flow. The twenty-four *tattvas,* or tangible aspects of creation, also emanated from him. The Supreme Brahman, in the form of divine waters, pervaded the entire void. Vishnu reclined on the body of the celestial serpent and went to sleep on these cosmic waters. Hence he acquired the name Narayana, or the one who reclines on water. Except for that primordial Being, there was nothing else.

Lord Narayana lay alone on his serpent bed absorbed in blissful self-awareness. It was the cosmic slumber in which all creation remained in a subtle state. After a period of a thousand *chaturyugas,* his power as time stimulated his suspended powers and he opened his brilliant eyes.

The whole universe was within him, lying in cosmic dissolution. As his inner gaze turned to these latencies within himself, they burst out of his navel in the most wondrous form of a lotus. It had the brilliance of a million suns, and it illuminated the expansive wastes of the cosmic waters like the rising sun illuminating the quarters—north, south, east, and west, northeast, northwest, southeast, and southwest. The all-pervading Being entered the lotus, and immediately there appeared the form of Brahma, who thus came to be known as the lotus-born and the self-born and is the embodiment of the Vedas. As Brahma turned his head in all of the four directions, he sprouted four faces, and when he looked up he got his fifth face. His complexion was ruddy. He looked around and saw himself seated on the lotus surrounded by the cosmic waters, knowing neither who he was nor where. The lotus stalk waved to and fro in the midst of the gigantic waves, lashed by the winds of dissolution.

Alone and helpless, he became afraid. "Who am I and where have I come from?"

Thinking thus, he climbed down the stalk for a hundred divine years and could not find its beginning. Despondent, he climbed back up and heard a celestial voice telling him to perform *tapasya*. Thus for another hundred divine years he performed severe penance, and then in his purified mind the truth of the Lord as the Indwelling Spirit dawned on him. Brahma had been unable to find this truth in his search in the outside world, for it is only within that this truth can be seen. He saw the Lord Narayana, lying on *adishesha,* his serpent bed. The serpent's thousand-jeweled hoods cast their glow over the cosmic waters, dispelling the darkness. He saw the incredibly beautiful form of the Lord that included within itself the whole universe. His clothes were like the evening clouds covering the mountains. His floral wreaths were made of all the various blossoms of the world. He saw him whose smile removes the sorrows of the world and all his wondrous accoutrements. Simultaneously Brahma saw the lotus coming out of the Lord's navel with himself sitting in it, amidst the turbulent cosmic waters. Seeing

that wondrous form of brilliant hue, Brahma was suffused with delight and asked him, "Who are you? Who am I? Pray enlighten me."

Lord Narayana enveloped him with his brilliance and said, "Welcome to you, O grandsire. Do not be afraid. I shall confer on you all that you desire."

Then Brahma, provoked by the quality of *rajas,* was filled with pride and said, "Who are you to confer anything on me. I am the self-born, the eternal, all-pervasive Brahma, the grandfather of the whole of creation."

Lord Vishnu said, "I know you as the Creator. For this purpose you have been born from the lotus, sprung from my navel. But you are not to be blamed for not knowing me. You have fallen prey to my illusion and forgotten your source. Know me to be the Supreme Brahman and the only truth."

Spurred by the Lord's power of *rajas,* a terrible anger rose in Brahma's mind, and he fought a wordy duel with Vishnu. At that moment Sadashiva appeared in the form of a huge column of fire before them, having neither beginning nor end. Both Vishnu and Brahma were bewildered at the sight of this enormous column of fire and decided to seek its source. Vishnu, the soul of the universe, took the form of a boar and sped to the netherworlds in order to discover the origin of that wondrous column. For many aeons Vishnu penetrated to the bowels of the universe in this form and thus acquired the name Svetavaraha, or the white boar. At last, exhausted, he returned.

Brahma took the form of a swan and flew toward the top of the column, trying to gauge its summit, but though he soared for many aeons, he failed to see it. He had decided to return and admit his defeat to Vishnu when suddenly he noticed the beautiful keora flower, which is famous in the worship of the gods, drifting down. Although it had been on its downward course for many years, it had lost neither its fragrance nor its luster. Brahma asked the flower where it was coming from and the flower answered that it was coming from somewhere in the middle of that primordial column and had been traveling for

vast ages. Then Brahma thought of a perfect way of convincing Vishnu that he had indeed seen the top of that mysterious Being. He asked the flower to accompany him and to swear that it had met him at the top. The flower agreed, and he returned triumphantly. Vishnu took his word, especially since he had a witness to prove the fact. But suddenly out of the column the mighty voice of the mysterious Lord pronounced these words, "Thou O Vishnu will in the future be considered as equal to me. Thou shalt be worshipped as the Supreme himself."

Then from that fire appeared the fearful form of Kala Bhairava, who was commanded by Sadashiva to chastise the deceitful Brahma. Bhairava pounced on him and caught hold of his fifth head, threatening to cut it off, but that compassionate and deeply forgiving soul, Vishnu, begged the Lord to forgive Brahma. Sadashiva relented and told the repentant Brahma, "O Brahma, in order to assume the role of Supreme Lord you resorted to deceit. In future you shall not be honored by anyone and you will not have any temples." Thus it is that to this day Brahma, the Creator, has no temples or devotees.

Then turning to the keora flower, Sadashiva said, "Due to the fact that you have been an accomplice to this deceit, you will no longer be used in my worship."

The flower begged for forgiveness, saying, "If I'm not to be included in thy worship, O Lord, the very purpose of my existence will be lost. Pray forgive me." Then Sadashiva relented and said that though his words could not be withdrawn, the flower could continue to be used in the decoration of temples. And so it is, to this day.

This column of fire was in the shape of a *linga*. The word *"linga"* actually means "a sign," or a characteristic. Brahman, the cosmic spirit, has no *linga,* but since the mind needs something concrete to hold on to, Shiva is depicted in the form of the *linga*. Shiva's *linga* is the divine phallus, the source of the seed of the cosmos, containing within it the entire universe of living and nonliving beings. All life is created from it and returns to it. The *yoni,* or sign of the female, forms the base of the *linga* and together they represent the union of man and woman,

Shiva and Shakti, the cosmic spirit combined with the cosmic Prakriti, or nature, through which the whole of creation comes into being. Usually a pot of water is suspended above the *linga* in order to cool it, since its origin is the fiery *linga* that stretched to infinity and whose nature none could fathom.

The day on which Sadashiva thus manifested as a column of fire was the day on which the constellation Ardhra was in ascendance, in the month of Margashirsha, November/December. Those who worship Shiva on that day will be blessed. The place where that great Being manifested himself as the column of fire was on the hill of Arunachala, where a holy center of worship sprang up over the course of time.

To Brahma and Vishnu, who had been humbled, Sadashiva explained, "I am the Supreme Brahman. My form is both manifest and unmanifest. I am both Brahman and Iswara. My form as Iswara can be known through all the forms of the various deities, and my form as Brahman can be known through this formless *linga*. Shiva can be worshipped through his formless aspect as the *linga,* as well as his aspect with form. All other gods, including both of you, will have aspects with form."

When Shiva takes on a form, he has five faces corresponding to his five powers of creation, maintenance, annihilation, concealment, and liberation. The syllable "A" comes from the northern face, the syllable "U" from the western, the syllable "M" from the southern, and the *bindu,* or dot, from the eastern face. The *nada,* or cosmic sound, comes from the middle face. These five all unite to form the mystic sound of *aum*. From these five sounds is born the five-syllabled *mantra, "Na·ma-shi·va·ya." Aum* indicates all knowledge, and the entire set of *mantras* and all the four Vedas have sprung from it. Different things are achieved by different *mantras,* but *omkara* (the sound of *aum*) alone achieves everything. Through repetition of this root *mantra,* both enjoyment and salvation can be attained.

At that time, *AUM,* the sound of eternity, which is the form of the Lord as *nada,* or sound, filled the air in every quarter. It filled the

hearts of Brahma and Vishnu with indescribable bliss. The sound manifested in a luminous form before the clear gaze of Vishnu, who was pure and free from all negative thoughts. The first syllable "A" blazed like the sun to the right of the column of fire, then the sound "U" appeared in the middle, and finally the sound "M," glittering like the lunar sphere, appeared to the left. Enveloped by that sound Vishnu meditated on the universal Being and asked to examine the column of fire once again. The truth was revealed to his calm mind. The column of fire was the Supreme Brahman. Nada is one of his forms. The sound "A" is expressed by the Creator, or Brahma; the sound "U" is expressed by the Enchanter, or Vishnu; and the sound "M" by the Rudra, or Shiva.

Both Brahma and Vishnu eulogized the Great Supreme. "Obeisance to thee, of the bodiless form. Obeisance to thee, of the formless luster. Obeisance to thee, Lord of everything. Obeisance to thee as the perfect sound, *aum*." Thus they praised their preceptor and prayed that he would take on a form that could be worshipped. The voice said that he would incarnate through the body of the Creator, Brahma, and would be known as Rudra; Shiva and Rudra would be the same principle. The voice also declared that Brahma should engage himself in the work of creation, and Vishnu, of protection. Rudra would be the cause of dissolution. Vishnu would be the bestower of salvation on all. In order to please Brahma and Vishnu, Sadashiva took the form of Dakshinamurthy, the preceptor of the world. He faced south, or *dakshina,* while Brahma and Vishnu faced north. He placed his lotus hands on their heads and slowly taught them the great *mantra* and the supreme knowledge.

The Iswara's Shakti, or power, manifested in three forms: As Saraswati, goddess of speech, she became the consort of Brahma; as Lakshmi, goddess of wealth, she was to become the wife of Narayana, or Vishnu; and as Kaali, she would stay with Rudra.

The voice continued, "Know Me to be the Supreme Brahman, the eternal, the endless, the perfect, and the unsullied. Vishnu has *tamas*

within but *sattva* outside; he will be the protector and sustainer of all the worlds. Brahma, who creates, will have *rajas* both within and without, and Shiva, who causes dissolution, will have *sattva* within but *tamas* outside. This is the position of the *gunas* in the three deities. O Vishnu! Spread your glories far and wide by taking up various incarnations. Remember that there is no difference between you and Shiva. He who worships you worships Shiva, and vice versa."

Both Brahma and Vishnu again eulogized the form that now disappeared from view. Brahma looked around to find that he was alone once more and was puzzled as to how he should proceed with the work of creation. So he meditated once again on Vishnu, who appeared before him in all his glory. When Brahma told him of his predicament, Lord Vishnu blessed Brahma and told him that the knowledge of creation would come automatically to him. He would be able to create all things without any external aid, for everything was contained in seed form within the lotus on which he was seated.

Brahma now created the seven sages: Marichi from his eyes, Brighu from his heart, Angiras from his head, and Pulaha, Vasishta, Kratu, and Daksha from his vital breath. Narada was created from his lap and Kardama from his shadow. *Dharma* (righteousness) came from his right breast. From his back came *adharma,* or unrighteousness, which is the seat of death, the terror of the worlds. From his heart came desire; from his eyebrows, anger. From his lower lip came greed and from his mouth, speech. From his urinary tract came all the oceans and from his anus the spirit of evil. From his mind were born the four boy sages known as Sanaka, Sanandana, Sanatana, and Sanatkumara. He begged them to proceed with the task of creation, but these pure souls were ever established in *atmic* consciousness (identification with all life) and refused to obey their father. At this disobedience on the part of his offspring, Brahma frowned with rage, and from that frown there appeared a boy with a ruddy complexion. He cried out, "O father, give me names and places of positions." Because he cried as soon as he appeared, Brahma called him Rudra, which means "don't cry." This is the story as given

in the *Bhagavatha Purana*. Brahma gave him eleven names and forms, along with appropriate consorts, and told him to create. Unfortunately Rudra's creations were as fierce looking as he was, so Brahma told him to stop creating. He told him to do *tapasya,* and thus Rudra did *tapasya* and came to be known as Shiva, or the auspicious one.

Since the work of creation was not progressing at all, Brahma prayed to the Divine to help him. At that time his body became divided into two halves, one of which was a man, called Swayambhu Manu, and the other a woman, called Shatarupa. They became husband and wife, and from that time onward, creation proceeded by way of sexual relationships.

> *O Resident of the mountains! We sing this hymn to you to propitiate you. Be pleased to make our world prosperous, our minds peaceful, and our bodies free from disease.*
>
> "Sri Rudrum," *Yajur Veda*

> *Let the blue-necked one make us happy, He who rises in crimson splendor in full view of the cowherds, the water maidens, and the creatures of the world.*
>
> "Sri Rudrum," *Yajur Veda*

> *O thousand-eyed One! O many quivered One! May you be pleased to unstring your bow, flatten the tips of your arrows, and become peaceful and well disposed toward us.*
>
> "Sri Rudrum," *Yajur Veda*

Let the arrows of your bow liberate us from pain and your quiver be directed against our enemies.

"Sri Rudrum," *Yajur Veda*

Aum Namashivaya!

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Aum Shambave Namaha!

3

Sandhya, the Evening Star

He in whom this universe, prior to its projection,
Was potentially present: like a tree in a seed,
And by whom it came into existence by the magic of
His own will,
Or like a great yogi creating out of His own power,
To that Dakshinamurthy, the Supreme Being,
Who came in the form of a benign Guru,
I offer my profound salutation.

"Dakshinamurthy Stotram" by Adi Shankara

The *Shiva Purana* says that after having created the seven sages, Brahma reflected within his mind and from his mind there arose the fascinating form of a woman. She was called Sandhya, which means "twilight," since she appeared at the time when day meets night. She was the perfection of womanly beauty and upon seeing her, the minds of Brahma and of all the other sages became extremely agitated. When Brahma felt the pangs of the emotion called love, another handsome being appeared out of his thoughts. He had a golden complexion, a fine nose, wonderful sensuous lips, and fine eyes with exciting eyebrows. On seeing Brahma, this person bowed before him and asked Brahma to give him a name and some occupation.

Brahma's mind was already agitated by the pangs of love and he spoke thus, "You will be known as Manmatha, since even at your birth you have begun to torment all our minds with thoughts of love. You will also be known as Kama since you will be able to take on any form you wish. Your power will be greater than the powers of all the gods put together. With this form of yours, as well as five flower arrows with which you have been born, you will be able to enamor and captivate the minds of men and women and thus ensure that creation will continue. No living being, not even the gods, will be able to defy you. Even I, as well as all the sages who are assembled here, have come under your sway. The minds of all living beings will be an easy target for your flower arrows. You will be able to invisibly enter the hearts of all people, thrilling them and making them lose their reasoning capacity. You will be able to arouse ecstasy in everyone."

Kama's five arrows, which even sages are unable to resist, are the abilities to delight, to appeal, to delude, to wither, and to kill. When he was given all these powers, Kama decided to try them out immediately in the presence of Brahma and the sages. He fitted an arrow to his bow, and immediately a beautiful, fragrant breeze started to blow, churning the minds of all those present, and as the arrow sped from his bow, those present started gazing at Sandhya and wishing to possess her. Kama did not stop shooting his arrows until all had completely lost their power of reasoning. Sandhya was also a victim. She started glancing shyly at each of them in turn, and looking provocatively at them. Kama was delighted at the success of his first venture. Brahma, however, had enough sense to realize that he was behaving badly; in his mind he begged the Lord to help him control his emotions. Lord Shiva appeared and chastised him for harboring sensual feelings for his own daughter.

(The same story is told in another way in the *Bhagavad Purana*. Brahma created Saraswati, the goddess of speech, and then fell in love with her. When his sons reprimanded him for his incestuous feelings, he forsook his body and took another body and then married Saraswati.)

Brahma felt ashamed of his emotions. He directed his anger against Kama, who was the perpetrator of all the misdeeds. "Since you are the cause of all our shame, O Kama, one day you will direct your arrows at the great Lord Shiva and then you will be severely punished for your crime!"

Hearing this Kama became quite despondent. "Why, O grandfather, have you cursed me like this? I have done nothing wrong, I have only carried out your orders. You, yourself, said that all of you, including Vishnu and Shiva, would become targets for my arrow. I merely wanted to test the efficacy of your words."

Brahma was pacified by this and said, "Your mistake was to have made me fall in love with Sandhya, who is my own daughter. However, don't be afraid. Even though Shiva will curse you, you will be reborn soon after." as cupid ♡

Saying this, Brahma vanished from view. The patriarch, Daksha, who was one of those born from Brahma, now presented his daughter Rati to Kama and asked him to accept her as his wife. On seeing the beautiful daughter of Daksha, Kama was pierced with his own arrows and happily agreed to marry her. She was indeed a fitting wife for him. She was capable of charming the whole world and was expert in all the varieties of lovemaking.

After watching all these proceedings, Sandhya felt sad and bereft. She felt most ashamed at her own behavior, for the feelings of lust that had churned up her mind. She decided that she could no longer bear to remain in the body that had cast a spell on her own father, as well as the Lords of the quarters, and went to the Himalayas to do *tapasya*. Brahma sent the sage Vasishta to instruct her. The sage took on the body of a young *brahmachari* (celibate) and taught Sandhya how to worship Shiva, the three-eyed God.

"O dear Lady," he said, "worship Lord Shiva, Lord of all the *devas* (lesser gods), with this *mantra,* 'Aum Namashivaya.' Perform all rites in silence and fast at the end of each period of worship." Having advised her thus, the sage left.

After Sandhya performed severe penance, Shiva appeared before her and blessed her. He told her to cast off her body in the sacrificial fire of the sage Medatithi, after which she would be reborn as Medatithi's daughter. The man on whom she fixed her mind at the time of death would be the person she would marry in her next life. Having blessed her thus, the Lord disappeared from view.

Sandhya went to the hermitage of the sage Medatithi as instructed by Shiva, and just before she entered the fire, she thought of the young *brahmachari* who had instructed her in the worship of Shiva and wished that she would have him as her husband in her next life. Her body became the sacrificial offering, and once it was totally purified by contact with fire, it was taken up to the heavens where it was divided into two portions. The upper half of her body became *pratah sandhya,* or dawn, which is a time especially propitious for the gods. The lower half became *shyama sandhya,* or dusk, which is especially pleasing to the *manes* (ancestors). At the end of the sacrifice, the sage Medatithi found a baby lying in the heart of the fire. He lifted her up tenderly and cared for her as his own child. Fire had cleansed Sandhya of all her sins, and she shone like molten gold. The sage gave her the name Arundhati. She grew up in the hermitage and when she came of age, her father gave her in marriage to the sage Vasishta, the young *brahmachari* on whom she had concentrated her mind at the time of entering the fire. Arundhati became famous for her chastity and purity and is still seen shining in the sky as an evening star—at the time known as *sandhya.*

> *O Lord Eternal like a mountain! On the very day you enslaved me, did you not appropriate my soul, my body, and my belongings! Today if anything untoward happens to me, be it good or be it bad, have I any mastery over this?*
>
> Saint Manikkavachagar

Prostrations to the golden-armed commander of cosmic forces, Lord of the four quarters. Prostrations to the source of all the green-leafed trees of Nature, Lord of all creatures. Prostrations to the golden-hued one, the self-effulgent, the Lord of all paths.

"Sri Rudrum," *Yajur Veda*

Prostrations to the one seated on the bull, the giver of food, destroyer of sins. Prostrations to the evergreen one, wearer of the sacred thread, chief among the healthy and strong. Prostrations to the Lord of the universe, the shield against the phenomenal world.

"Sri Rudrum," *Yajur Veda*

Aum Namashivaya!

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Aum Ambikanathaya Namaha!

4
Durga's Promise

If one could but be privileged to see
The arched eyebrows, the rosy red lips,
The budding smile, the wet matted locks,
The milk-white sacred ash on the body of coral hue,
And the sweet lifted foot,
Even human birth on this earth would be desirable.

Saint Thirunavukkarasar

Brahma was unhappy that Lord Shiva had reprimanded him for harboring sexual feelings for his own daughter, Sandhya, and consulted Daksha and his other sons about what should be done. Shiva's lack of understanding about sexual feelings originated from the fact that he was a yogi and had no knowledge of women or passion. In order to make Shiva suffer the pangs of love, Brahma asked for help from Kama and his wife, Rati.

"Unless that primordial being Shiva indulges in sexual sport, creation will continue to be mediocre. In the case of Shiva, who is extremely detached, only Kama's power can prevail." Thus saying, Brahma requested Kama to try his wiles on Lord Shiva. He also created Vasanta, or spring, to be Kama's permanent companion and thus

aid him in his exploits. "O Kama, for the benefit of the world, please go and try to enchant Shiva. Wherever Shiva goes, follow him and shoot your arrows at him so that he will be inclined to take a wife. Over mountains or lakes, through forests or peaks, follow him wherever he goes and charm him. You alone have the power to do this. He is averse to women and is in full control of himself."

Hearing these words of the Creator, Kama, accompanied by Vasanta and the gentle *malaya* breeze, left for the harsh mountains, caves, and dales throughout which Shiva roamed. Wherever Kama went, the season changed. No longer did the cold winds blow against the icy fastness of the Himalayan regions. Instead, the gentle *malaya* breeze, fragrant with the perfume of a thousand flowers, swept the region. All the trees bloomed simultaneously as spring burst into a profusion of flowers, but Shiva was not beguiled; he was immersed in *atmic* bliss. Arrow after arrow sped from Kama's sugarcane bow. Both he and Rati tried all their tricks. All living beings succumbed to their charms, but not Shiva. He alone was unaffected and did not even notice what was happening. Kama's ego was squashed, and he returned dejectedly to Brahma.

"O Brahma! Listen to me. Though I tried my best to enchant Shiva, he remained unaffected. In complete control of his senses, he continued to remain in a state of *samadhi* (superconsciousness) despite all my efforts to shake him out of it. Wherever Shiva went, Rati and I followed him closely and darted arrow after arrow at him, but neither he nor his *ganas* (followers) were moved by them. Whenever he came out of *samadhi,* I placed many pairs of birds and animals before him, all engaged in mating games. He remained unmoved. Never did my arrow find a vulnerable point in him. Vasanta, who accompanied me, also did her best. He covered the mountain slopes with fragrant flowers and the lakes with lotuses. Seeing all this abundance of nature, even the sages fell prey to passion. Need I then speak about the state of ordinary mortals? But there was no wavering to be seen in the demeanor of Lord Shiva. He did not even evince anger at me. What could I do

but return? I assure you that there is no one in the whole world who is capable of arousing lust in him. If you want him to marry, you will have to produce someone who is capable of arousing his love." So saying, Kama returned to his abode followed by his wife, Rati, and his troupe of helpers.

Brahma was quite dejected at this news and did not know what to do. Brahma's nature was *rajasic,* active and energetic, while Shiva's was *tamasic,* passive and contemplative. In between stood Vishnu, the cosmic savior, totally *sattvic,* always interested in maintaining the cosmic order. He preserved the cosmic balance between the aggressiveness of the Creator, Brahma, and the regressiveness of the Destroyer, Rudra. Thus the three—Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva—represent *shrishti, sthiti,* and *samhara,* or creation, preservation, and destruction. Brahma realized that if Shiva became totally dispassionate about the world, the cosmic balance would be destroyed, since a certain amount of tension is always necessary to maintain the work of creation. Suddenly he thought of calling on Lord Vishnu, who was the primary cause of Brahma's own creation. The moment he thought of him, Vishnu, the lotus-eyed one, four-armed and blue in color, appeared before him and smilingly asked what he wanted. Brahma repeated his tale of woe, that he had sent Kama to enchant Shiva and failed miserably.

Vishnu smiled at hearing this tale and said, "O Brahma! How is it that this delusion has befallen you? Do you not know that Shiva is the Mahayogi, free from all illusion, ever immersed in the bliss of the self? How could you ever think of making him fall prey to Kama's wiles? O Brahma, if you really want Shiva to marry, then you will have to pray to Shiva himself. You know his Shakti is a part of him. Shakti is his feminine counterpart and is known as Shivaa. If that goddess takes on a human birth, she will definitely become his wife, for she is a part of him. Command your son Daksha to do penance and propitiate that goddess, and induce her to take birth as his daughter; then ask Daksha to give her to Shiva in marriage. Remember, at the time when all three of us came out of that formless Brahman, it was declared that Lakshmi

would be my feminine counterpart, Saraswati yours, and Sati would be Shiva's. Sadashiva incarnated himself as Rudra and came out of your brows. He is now residing in Kailasa awaiting the advent of Shivaa in the form of Sati, daughter of Daksha. Therefore make all preparations for her advent." Thus saying, Lord Vishnu blessed Brahma and vanished from view.

As soon as Vishnu left, Brahma began to meditate on Shivaa, or Durga, the feminine counterpart of Shiva. The goddess is *vidya* and *avidya,* both knowledge and ignorance. She is nothing but the Supreme Brahman. Pleased with his penance, the goddess Durga appeared before Brahma. She was dark as night and had four divine arms, one of which carried the blue lotus and the other a sword. The third was raised in the *mudra* (mystic symbol made with the fingers) of blessing. Her eyes were dark and lustrous and gleamed like the pearls that adorned her disheveled tresses. The mystic third eye on her forehead was closed. She was as beautiful as the autumn moon, and the crescent moon bedecked her broad forehead. She was seated on a magnificent lion that gazed at her lovingly with its tawny eyes.

On seeing this wondrous apparition of the divine Shakti, Brahma, folded his palms and sang her praises: "Obeisance to Thee, O Goddess! You are the eternal energy of Brahman who has manifested herself in many forms. In the form of Lakshmi you have found a place beside Vishnu; in the form of the earth you hold everything within yourself. You are both action and nonaction; you are the cause of both creation and destruction. You are that primary energy of both movable and immovable objects, and capable of enchanting everyone. Though unmanifest, you are capable of taking on infinite manifestations. You are eternal time that holds the worlds in thrall."

Hearing this hymn of Brahma's, the goddess was pleased and asked him what he wanted from her. Brahma replied, "O goddess, the great God Shiva, who has manifested himself as Rudra through my forehead, is now residing in Kailasa. He performs penance all alone and refuses to take a wife. You are his eternal Shakti. He is the Lord of yoga and

cannot be tempted by any woman. But as you know, the path of yoga, or restraint, has to be balanced by the path of *bhoga,* or pleasure. You alone in the entire world are capable of exciting Lord Shiva, as you enchanted Vishnu in your form as Lakshmi. O mother of the universe, I pray you to be born as Daksha's daughter and bewitch the Lord, who is totally detached from worldly life. At the moment Daksha is performing penance with his mind directed to you. Be pleased to grant his wish that you should be born as his daughter, Sati." The goddess agreed to his request and after blessing him, she vanished from view.

She appeared before Daksha, who was practicing penance on the seashore as directed by Brahma. Her beauty charmed Daksha and bowing low, he sang a hymn of praise to her. She was pleased by his devotion and asked him to choose a boon. Daksha said, "O mother of the universe! As you know, Rudra has incarnated himself as Shiva but so far has not taken a wife. You alone are capable of enacting this role, so kindly deign to be born as my daughter and become Shiva's wife. This is the boon that I crave."

Hearing these words the goddess replied, "O Daksha! You have spoken rightly. I'm the only fitting mate for Shiva. I am his beloved in every manifestation, so I shall incarnate myself as your daughter. Return to your abode and remain in prayer. Your wish will soon be fulfilled. But there is one condition, O Daksha. If at any time in the future you show disrespect to me or to Shiva, I shall withdraw into myself and cast off my body." Thus saying, the goddess disappeared from Daksha's view.

> *Prostrations to the robber chief, armed with quiver and arrows. Prostrations to the deceiving, elusive chief of marauders. Prostrations to the wandering, ever-evasive chief of forest thieves!*
>
> "Sri Rudrum," *Yajur Veda*

Prostrations to the chief of thieves, ever-alert in defense and eager to strike. Prostrations to the chief of dacoits (bandits), who moves about in the night carrying swords. Prostrations to the red-capped resident of the mountains, who steals our belongings.

"Sri Rudrum," *Yajur Veda*

Prostrations to you who are both seated and reclining. Prostrations to you who are both sleeping and awake. Prostrations to you who are in the static and the dynamic. Prostrations to you who are in both the chiefs and the assemblies.

"Sri Rudrum," *Yajur Veda*

Aum Namashivaya!

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Aum Pinakine Namaha!

5

The Courtship of Sati

Young doe is she, or tender bud of a divine flower.
Or the early stage of fragrant honey,
Or the beautiful tendril of the young coral beneath the waves of the sea.
Or the early streaks of the rays of the moon.
Or the miniature bow on which Cupid practiced.

SEKKIZHAR IN THE *PERIYA PURANAM*

Daksha now retired to his own hermitage, and Brahma asked him to get married and beget progeny in order to increase the population of the world, which was woefully underpopulated in those times. He married two women, Asikni and Virini. By his second wife he begat many sons, all of whom he sent west with instructions to create. When they reached the famous holy lake known as Narayana Saras and touched the waters, they changed their minds and decided to perform austerities at that beautiful spot. Hearing of this resolve of the sons of Daksha, the sage Narada went to that place and advised them to abandon their desire for children and concentrate on the Lord, and thus enlighten themselves. The intelligent sons of Daksha, realizing the truth of his words, gave up their intentions to marry and instead wandered about

as yogis in search of truth. Hearing of the fate of his sons, Daksha, undaunted, begat another thousand sons by his other wife. When they came of age they also went to the lake called Narayana Saras. As soon as they touched the holy waters of the lake, their minds changed. Once again Narada went to them and advised them to search for God rather than wives, and they went the way of their brothers and roamed about as yogis.

Daksha was grief stricken at the loss of all of his wonderful sons. Hearing of the dastardly trick Narada had played on him, he cursed Narada and said, "Since you have made my sons into homeless vagabonds roaming about in search of God, you, O Narada, will never have a proper home for yourself. If you stay longer than a few hours at any one place your head will burst. You are condemned to be a cosmic wanderer, never resting for long at any place, always on the move."

Narada was not a whit disturbed by this curse, but thanked Daksha for his kindness in having cursed him thus. The curse ensured that he could always roam about the world singing the praises of Lord Vishnu on his lute, which was just what he liked to do. The devotees of Lord Vishnu are always peaceful of disposition and never given to violent outbursts of temper, even if they are abused.

Having lost all his sons, Daksha decided that he would try his hand at begetting daughters, who were not as likely to wander off as his sons had done. He then begat sixty daughters and as soon as they came of age, he arranged their marriages. Ten were married off to Dharma, Lord of righteousness; thirteen to the sage Kashyapa; and twenty-seven to the moon, Chandra. The rest were married off to various people, and the progeny of these daughters slowly started to fill the world.

It was at this time that Daksha had a quarrel with his son-in-law, the moon. It appears that Daksha made a habit of quarreling with all his sons-in-law, as we shall see. Chandra, the moon god, had married twenty-seven of Daksha's daughters. These are the twenty-seven lunar asterisms (small groups of stars), but Chandra showed a marked preference for Rohini, the fairest amongst them. The others complained to

their father, and Daksha cursed Chandra that his beautiful body would weaken and wither. As the curse took effect, the moon became weaker and weaker. He was terrified and went to Vishnu, who advised him to go to the supreme physician, Vaidyanatha, or Shiva, custodian of the sacred herb, *soma,* for which he is also known as Somnatha. Shiva cured Chandra, but each time Chandra returned to his own abode the dreaded malady struck again. At last Chandra begged Shiva to cure him completely. Shiva agreed to do so and gave him a place in his own tresses. The crescent moon, *chandrakala,* adorns the locks of Shiva, and thus Shiva acquired the name Chandrashekara. However, Daksha would not forgive Shiva for saving one whom he had cursed.

It was now that Daksha remembered the promise made to him by the goddess Durga, that she would be born as his daughter. Therefore, he and his wife prayed to the goddess and she appeared. She told them to do certain purification rites and she would soon take birth in the womb of Virini, Daksha's wife. True to her word, the goddess Shivaa, also known as Durga, Kaali, and so on, was born to Daksha. At the time of her birth there was a gentle shower of rain and flowers from the sky. She showed her divine form to her parents, and they eulogized her with many hymns. She then became a baby once more and started to cry, as all newborn babes do. She was called Sati. As a child her favorite pastime was to sit in one place and draw portraits of Shiva, whom she had never seen in this birth. All her songs were of Shiva or Rudra.

One day Brahma, accompanied by the sage Narada, went to Daksha's abode and told Sati that her desires would be fulfilled and she would secure Lord Shiva as her husband. She approached her mother and informed her that she was going on a year's penance in order to secure Shiva as her husband.

She then started to do severe penance in order to propitiate Shiva. Every month she worshipped Shiva in various ways, undergoing rigorous tortures of her body until one full year had passed. At the end of the year she concluded her worship and sat concentrated on the three-eyed Lord, the all-merciful. Even the sages came to see Sati, for she had

reached an exalted state that even they had failed to reach after many years of *tapasya*. The sages approached Lord Vishnu and begged him to intercede with Shiva on Sati's behalf. Accompanied by Brahma and Vishnu, they went to Kailasa and praised Shiva. He was delighted and asked them to name their desire and he would fulfill it. They jointly begged him to accept a wife, just as Vishnu had accepted Lakshmi, and Brahma, Saraswati.

Hearing this Shiva spoke, "O Devas! Only a person of imperfect knowledge will desire marriage. It is a great bondage. I am a yogi, ever delighting in the bliss of the self. I'm always engaged in *tapasya* and totally detached from the world. What interest would I have in marriage? Moreover I'm the friend of ghosts and goblins. I visit the burning ghats and crematoriums. My body is covered with the ashes of cremated bodies. Serpents and reptiles are my ornaments. What woman would want to marry me?"

Again the gods begged him to reconsider their request, for it was imperative for the good of the world that he have a consort. Hearing their words, Shiva smiled and said, "All right. I can never refuse the requests of my devotees so I shall take a wife, but remember she will have to be a very special type of woman. When I am a yogi, she will have to be a yogini, and when I desire her she will have to be a wife. When I go into *samadhi,* she should not approach me for she will be burnt to ashes in the fire of my austerity. If she refuses to believe in what I say, I will abandon her. Consider all these factors, O Brahma, and then tell me if such a woman can be found amongst your creation!"

Brahma was delighted at these words and said, "Indeed, O Lord, such a woman has been born, as the daughter of Daksha. She is known as Sati and is a fitting mate for you. At present she is performing rigorous penance in order to secure you as her husband. She is the same mother Goddess who has taken on the form of Lakshmi and Saraswati." Vishnu also spoke highly of Sati's qualities and urged Shiva to grant their request and Sati's wish. Shiva agreed.

On the eighth day of the bright half of the month of Asvini, Sati

observed her final fast, which concluded her one-year worship of Shiva. She was sitting in the forest engrossed in meditation on his form when Shiva appeared before her. He showed her his incomparable form with five faces, three eyes, and crescent moon adorning his locks. He was holding the trident and drum. His face was brilliant, and Sati could hardly gaze at him. She lowered her eyes shyly and knelt at his feet.

Although he knew her desire, he asked her to choose a boon, for he wanted to hear her express her wish boldly to him without any reserve. But she was very shy and would not speak. Again he urged her to openly express her desire. At last she whispered, "O Lord, why do you play with me? You know my desire. Let me have the bridegroom of my choice."

Hardly had she finished when he replied, "You shall indeed be my wife, O Sati!" Delighted to hear these words, she could not speak a word but could only smile sweetly at him. Looking at her fascinating form, even the stern, ascetic heart of Shiva melted with the emotion of love and he gazed tenderly at her. At last Sati spoke, "O Lord, be pleased to approach my father and ask him for my hand in the accepted mode of conduct." Shiva agreed, and she bowed to him and returned to her parents' palace with great joy. Her friends informed Virini that Shiva had granted Sati the boon for which she had been doing *tapasya*. Both Daksha and Virini were very happy to hear this. They were wondering how to proceed in this matter when Brahma appeared before them accompanied by his consort, Saraswati. Shiva had asked that he go to Daksha and formally ask for his daughter's hand in marriage, for that was her wish. Brahma said, "O Daksha! That which we have all desired has now come to pass. He who could not be tempted by Kama's arrows has now fallen prey to your daughter, Sati. The great Lord has now abandoned meditation on the self and is now thinking only of Sati. Therefore allow me to go and let Shiva know that you have given your consent."

Daksha readily gave his consent, and Brahma went and reported the matter to Shiva, who was waiting in a fever of impatience about the

outcome of his proposal. Shiva was delighted to get the news. When a devotee gives all her heart to him, the Lord in turn becomes equally impatient to give his love to her. Without further debate, Shiva collected his fearsome-looking attendants and told Brahma and the sages to accompany him.

On a Sunday in the bright half of the month of Chaitra, Shiva, accompanied by Brahma, Vishnu, and all the sages, as well as his own *ganas,* proceeded to the kingdom of Daksha. The bridegroom was clad in the hides of an elephant and tiger. He had matted locks with the crescent moon peeping from them, and serpents adorning his neck.

Daksha and his wife welcomed the party with great delight and asked Brahma to conduct the marriage rites. Brahma complied with the request and gave Sati to Shiva. It was a union of Shiva and Shakti, the ideal couple. Shiva firmly grasped her trembling hand in his and led her three times round the sacred fire, as was customary. The rest of the ceremonies were concluded, and Shiva left the place, seated on the bull Nandi, with Sati placed on his lap in front of him. All the gods accompanied the bridal party to a certain distance. Then Shiva and Sati, escorted by his *ganas,* proceeded to the Himalayan range, which was his abode.

> *Prostrations to you who are in the forms of carpenters and chariot-makers. Prostrations to you who are in the forms of hunters and fishermen. Prostrations to you who are in the forms of hounds and their keepers.*
>
> "Sri Rudrum," *Yajur Veda*

> *Prostrations to the resident of the mountains, who is present in all beings. Prostrations to the one with the bow, which rains heavily through the clouds. Prostrations to the short one, who is beautiful. Prostrations to the ancient one, who transcends time,*

space, and matter. Prostrations to the venerable old one, who expands through prayers.

"Sri Rudrum," *Yajur Veda*

Unattached, unattached, unattached am I (to the body, mind, and intellect).
I alone and changeless exist in the form of consciousness and bliss.
I am ever pure and free, without change of form and nature.
I am ever full . . . I alone exist, changeless.

I am eternal and without boundaries,
Immutable and unshakeable.
I alone exist,
Changeless in the form of consciousness and bliss.

"Dasisloka" by Adi Shankaracharya

Aum Namashivaya!

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Aum Shashishekaraya Namaha!

6

Sati and Shiva

Be attached to Him, who is without attachment.
Hold on to that attachment.
Only then will you be able to leave other attachments.

Saint Thirvalluvar

Sati was the perfect mate for Shiva. She had no interest in anything other than following him and pleasing him, but this did not mean that she had no mind of her own. On the contrary, though she was Sati, she was also Durga and Kaali, and when she made up her mind nothing could deter her, as we shall see. But for the moment she cared not for the loss of the luxuries of palace life, where she was waited upon, hand and foot. All she wanted was to roam about wildly in the wake of her strange husband, across the desolate Himalayan ranges and peaks inhabited by wild animals, followed by his horde of goblins, the *ganas*. At first he hardly glanced at her, but she cared not for his apparent lack of interest and continued to follow him.

One day he suddenly asked her, "Why do you follow me?" She answered, "Because I'm your wife."

"Why did you marry me?" he queried.

"Because I'm incomplete without you," she replied.

"I have nothing to offer you."

"But I ask for nothing but you," she countered.

"I have no parentage or lineage or possessions. These strange creatures alone are my kith and kin."

"I want nothing but you. Those whom you consider your own are also my own," was her reply.

Her tenacity and love at last won him over completely, and he ordered his *ganas* to leave them in peace, that he would call them when he needed them. Then the Lord took Sati into his arms and sported with her as any man with a newlywed wife. He never left her side even for a moment, and even if he did, he would return suddenly and close her eyes from behind, so that she would tremble and cling to him for support. He would suddenly become invisible and then catch her and make her shriek with fright, and then appear before her so that she would again rush into his arms in apparent terror. Sometimes he gathered flowers for her hair and adorned her with garlands. Sometimes when she looked into a deep pool in order to admire her own face, he would come behind her and gaze into the water. She was the dark monsoon cloud from behind which the full moon was peeping, for Sati was the color of ebony and Shiva, fair as the moon. Then he would gather lotuses from the lake and decorate her dark body with flowers. Very often he would help to dress her after her bath and anoint her with sandalwood perfume and apply musk on her breast.

When winter set in, Shiva thought of Kama, and Kama arrived accompanied by Vasanta. With the arrival of spring, trees and creepers bloomed and blossomed in the Himalayan glades in accord with the inclination of the Lord. Lakes were covered with blooming lotuses and the gentle *malaya* breeze drenched the air with perfume. Spices such as cloves and cardamom added to the fragrance, making the bees dizzy with delight. The nights were bright with the moon, in a sky devoid of clouds. In this enticing atmosphere, Lord Shiva consorted with Sati for many years. Just as ropes bind an elephant, he seemed to be bound by the loveliness of her face and her charming, provocative ways. On the

ridges and in the caverns of the Himalayan ranges, Lord Shiva sported with Sati for twenty-five years, according to the calculation of the gods. But despite all this play of love, never once did he lose his seed.

Once, with the advent of the monsoon season, Sati complained to Shiva, "O dearest husband, this is a most unpleasant season for wanderers like us who are without a fixed abode. These fearful rumblings and streaks of lightning frighten me. Neither the sun nor the moon is visible. The huge *devataru* trees are falling down with crashing sounds. The day appears as night. See my body, lacerated by cruel hailstones that fall mercilessly on me. Only the peacocks are delighted with the sound of thunder and dance with delight. In this season even crows and *chakora* birds make nests. We alone are homeless. O my dearest Lord, please make a residence for us without delay."

Hearing these words of Sati, Shiva said, "O my beloved one! Let it be as you wish. Choose the place in which you would like to stay and a fitting abode shall be made for you. Do you wish to reside in Mount Meru where the gods reside? Perhaps your preference is for Kasi. Name it and it shall be yours without further delay. Your beauty will rival the beauty of the heavenly damsels and make them blush with shame. Or do you wish to abide in the realm of Himavan, the king of the Himalayas, with the mountain women and the daughters of the *nagas* (serpents) to attend to you? Even the beasts of prey are peaceful there, for it is the abode of many sages and saints. Perhaps you wish to dwell on my own mountain of Kailasa, close to the abode of Kubera, the god of wealth? Make your choice. It is all yours."

Sati chose to go to the country of Himavan, so the Lord took her there and made a beautiful residence for her and stayed with her for many divine years. He was never bored of her company, and she was always enchanted with his. Lord Shiva, who had once delighted only in the *atman,* now delighted only in Sati. Day and night they gazed with delight into each other's eyes, oblivious to the world, wrapped in their own love.

At last one day Sati freed herself from his embrace and started

questioning him on many subjects that only he could answer. This she did for the sake of the world, for she herself was the Divine Mother and knew all the answers.

Sati asked, "O great Yogi! I wish to know that principle from which all creatures can find release from their misery. What is it that will enable people to free themselves from worldly bondage and attain the supreme region?"

"O goddess Sati, listen carefully for I shall give you that knowledge that shall free all souls in bondage. O goddess, know that the supreme knowledge consists in experiencing the great truth, 'I am Brahman' (aham brahmasmi). In a perfect intellect, nothing else is remembered. This sort of consciousness is very rare in the world. But, O beloved, remember that I myself am the Supreme Brahman, as is Vishnu. Devotion to him or to me is the easiest method of attaining salvation. Supreme devotion is the same as supreme knowledge and is easier to practice. One who is engrossed in devotion enjoys perpetual bliss. Devotion has the power to attract me as nothing else can. I go even to the home of the outcastes if they are devotees. The nine qualities of devotion are listening to the glories of God, praising him, remembering him at all times, serving him, surrendering the ego to him, worshipping him in various ways, prostrating to him, dedication to him, and friendliness and kindness to all his creatures. The devotee always believes that whatever I bestow on him is for his good. He dedicates everything to me and keeps nothing for himself. One who attains these nine qualities attains everything—perfect knowledge and worldly success, and eventual salvation. In this Iron Age of Kali, there is no path so easy and pleasing to me as the path of devotion. In this decadent age, *jnana,* or spiritual knowledge, and *vairagya,* or detachment, have become misused and neglected. People who can grasp them are rare. But O beloved! Devotion can give all the benefits of the other two and is most pleasing to me. Remember that both Vishnu and I are subservient to those who are devoted to us."

Sati was very happy to hear this discourse on devotion. She contin-

ued to question him on many matters relating to the *sastras* (rules), to ethics, morality, and religion, the conduct of different people at different times, and knowledge of *yantras* (mystical diagrams) and *mantras* (sacred sounds).

These wonderful dialogues between Shiva and Sati on all these various topics are the basis of much of the great knowledge that is found in Hindu philosophy. All the sacred lore relating to such sciences as astrology, medicine, herbal lore, palmistry, and so on was given to her. Shiva explained many things with the help of *yantras* and *mantras*. Thus Sati and Shiva, who are intrinsically nothing but the Supreme Brahman, who are omniscient and are always determined to give help to human beings, carried on their discourses in the Himalayan regions in order to help the afflicted and enable human beings to rise out of the ocean of *samsara,* or the wheel of human existence.

Once Shiva, accompanied by Sati and seated on his bull, wandered over the earth. This was the time of the Sri Rama *avatara* (incarnation), when Lord Vishnu had taken on the form of the prince of Kosala in order to rid the world of the demon Ravana. Rama had been exiled to the forest by his stepmother. While they were residing there his beloved wife, Sita, was abducted by Ravana. Rama was bereft and wandered, lamenting the loss of his wife. It was at this time that Shiva and Sati came to the forest known as Dandaka and saw Rama totally bereft, bemoaning the loss of his wife as would any lovelorn husband.

Seeing Rama and his brother, Lakshmana, Sati asked Shiva, "O Lord, who are these two persons who seem to be greatly distressed over some loss? How is it that you are so delighted to see them and have even gone down and bowed to the blue-complexioned one?"

Shiva smiled and explained, "O goddess! These two are brothers called Rama and Lakshmana. They are the sons of Dasaratha, king of Ayodhya, and belong to the solar dynasty. The elder one, Rama, is the *avatara* of Vishnu. He is incapable of being harassed. The Lord has incarnated on earth for the welfare and protection of the good. In his human form he merely plays the role of the grief-stricken husband.

Actually he is ever immersed in the bliss of the self." Seeing Rama's extreme sorrow, Sati could not quite believe Shiva's explanation. Seeing her doubt, Shiva told her to go and test Rama. Sati was all too ready to put him to the test and decided to take on the form of Sita and go before Rama. "If he is indeed Vishnu," she thought, "he will be able to penetrate my disguise."

Rama immediately saw through her disguise and bowed to her, saying, "O goddess Sati, obeisance to you. Why have you thrown off your own form and taken on this guise? Where is your Lord, Shiva? Have you come alone?"

Sati was delighted to hear Rama's words and became convinced of his divinity. She told him the whole story of how she had doubted Shiva's word and had wanted to test Rama. But she still had a doubt. She had always thought that Shiva and Vishnu were on par with each other, so why did her husband worship Rama? This was her next question.

Rama answered, "Once Shiva made the divine architect Visvakarma erect a fantastic hall in which was placed a throne of great beauty. He invited all the gods, sages, and celestial beings to congregate there. Then he invited Vishnu from Vaikunta and made him sit on that exquisite throne, and at a most auspicious hour, to the accompaniment of Vedic chants, he placed the golden crown on Vishnu's head and announced to all that from then on, Vishnu was worthy of worship equal to that given to him.

"At that time, Shiva said, 'You are Lord of the universe. You are the one who is supremely worthy of worship by all. You will be invincible in battle even against me. I shall personally give salvation to your devotees.' Thus did Lord Shiva speak and from that time onward he worships me and I worship him."

Sati was satisfied when she heard this, but she was feeling troubled at having doubted her husband's words. When she returned to Shiva she was pensive and sad. Seeing her in this mood, Shiva inquired after the cause of her distress. She voiced her doubt to Shiva, and he immediately thought of the promise he had once made to Vishnu, that if Sati

ever doubted him or his teachings, he would abandon her. Although he did not say a word of this to her, she guessed that some disturbing thought had arisen in his mind, and while he continued to behave with the greatest of love to her, both of them realized that soon some incident would occur that would enable him to keep his word.

> *When all beings are realized as one's atman* [self], *that seer of oneness has no delusion of sorrow.*
>
> "Yoga Vasishta" by sage Vasishta

Aum Namashivaya!

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Aum Rudraya Namaha!

7

Daksha's Yajna

More fiery is He than fire,
More cool is He than water,
None fully understands His mercy.
Aloof He may be but close to His devotees,
More than a mother, tenderhearted is He.

Saint Thirumoolar

Once a great *yajna,* or fire sacrifice, was performed by the sages who assembled at the sacred confluence of the three rivers, Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati, which is known as Prayaga. Lord Shiva had also come there, accompanied by his wife Sati. All those assembled there rose from their seats and paid obeisance to him. They seated him with great honor and eulogized him with great devotion. Soon after, Daksha came into the hall, and everyone rose to honor him. Shiva, however, remained in his seat. Daksha, who had become arrogant due to his status in the world, was incensed by this mark of disrespect from his own son-in-law.

Angrily he spoke, "How is it that when the rest of the world gives me respect, only this man who is my son-in-law arrogantly refuses to honor me? He is totally uncultured and mannerless. But then, what can you expect of one whose attendants are goblins and ghosts? He

lives in cremation grounds and wears serpents for garlands. He may be my daughter's husband, but I'm going to curse him."

Then turning to the others he proclaimed, "Listen, all of you. From this day onward, let this Shiva, who lacks nobility of birth and pedigree, who frequents cemeteries and burial grounds, be expelled from all sacrifices. Henceforth none of you should give him a share of any sacrifice!" Brighu was one of the sages who acquiesced to these stupid words of Daksha. Shiva said nothing, but his beloved attendant Nandi, who could take on the form of his vehicle, the bull, rose and denounced Daksha in forcible terms.

"O foolish Daksha," he said, "how dare you curse Lord Shiva, whose very presence sanctifies all the worlds. He is Mahadeva, the great Lord by whom the universe is created, sustained, and destroyed. One glance from him is enough to reduce you and your entourage to ashes. The fact that he doesn't do it now shows the extent of his mercy. But beware! You will soon have your pride reduced to ashes!"

Daksha was furious with Nandi for daring to rebuke him publicly, and cursed him as well as all of Shiva's attendants. "All of you will be condemned as heretics and will be cast out of Vedic society. Matted hair, ashes, and skulls will be your ornaments. You will be expelled from all Vedic rites."

Hearing this, Nandi was furious and cursed them all in return. "O foolish people, the great Lord Shiva has been cursed by evil-minded sages like Brighu because of their pride in being Brahmins. But I tell you, these Brahmins who are indulging in lust, anger, covetousness, and pride will become shameless beggars. They will be perpetually poor and will go even to the houses of the Shudras for the sake of money. Due to their greed for money they will fall into hell and be born as *rakshasas* (demons). Daksha's handsome face will soon disappear and be replaced by the face of a goat."

On hearing this exchange of curses, there was a hue and cry amongst those assembled. Only Shiva was unperturbed. Very sweetly he turned to Nandi and asked, "O dear one, why have you become so

angry? Daksha cannot curse me for I myself am the sacrifice, the sacrificial rite, the adjunct of the sacrifice, and the very self of the sacrifice. Who is Daksha? Who are you? Who are all these people? In reality I am all. Knowing this you should not grieve, nor should you curse anyone. Daksha has done this through his ignorance, for which he will be forced to pay a heavy price. But you are my devotee and should be free from anger and other negative emotions."

Hearing these wise words of his master, Nandi became calm and free from anger. After this unpleasant scene, Shiva returned to his abode accompanied by Sati and the *ganas*. Daksha and his followers also returned to their respective abodes. He was seething with anger against Shiva and waiting for an opportunity to put his curses into practice.

In order to insult Shiva, Daksha started a great *yajna* to which he invited all the gods, sages, and celestial beings. Needless to say, he deliberately avoided sending an invitation to Shiva. Brahma and Vishnu were invited and brought in state to the grand *yajna,* the likes of which had never been seen by anyone before. The place where Daksha held his sacrifice was called Kankhala, near modern Haridwar, presently known as Kankhal. Since Shiva was not invited, his daughter Sati was also left out, though formerly she had been Daksha's favorite. To house the august assembly of gods, sages, and emperors, Visvakarma, the divine architect, created many beautiful mansions.

The sage Dadichi, a devotee of Shiva, spoke forcibly to Daksha, "O Daksha! This sacrifice will be incomplete and imperfect unless Shiva is invited. Go immediately with the sages and bring the great Lord along with Sati to this place. He is the source of all auspiciousness. Without him, everything will be inauspicious and imperfect."

Daksha replied haughtily, "Vishnu, who is the prime cause of this cosmos, who is the source of all virtues, has graced this place by his presence. Brahma, the grandfather of all the worlds, has come, along with the Vedas and the Upanishads. Indra, the king of gods, as well as the celestial sages have come with their retinues. What is the neces-

sity of having Shiva here? He is of ignoble birth, the Lord of goblins, ghosts, and spirits. I gave my beloved daughter to him only at the bidding of Brahma. He is totally unworthy of being invited to this noble assembly." Dadichi cursed Daksha, told him that his destruction was imminent, and stalked out of the *yajna,* followed by some of Shiva's other devotees.

In the meantime, on the mountain of Gandhamadana in the Himalayas, Sati was engrossed in sport with her friends. Suddenly she saw her sister, Rohini, traveling in an aerial vehicle accompanied by her husband, Chandra, the moon deity. She asked her friend Vijaya to find out their destination. They told her of the details of Daksha's sacrifice to which all beings had been invited, and to which they were now proceeding. Now Sati saw that all the rest of her fifty-nine sisters and many other celestial beings were also proceeding in the same direction. "Why has my father not invited my husband and me?" she thought to herself. "It must be an omission on his part. Let me go and ask Shiva about this."

So thinking, she ran to Shiva and told him the whole story. Shiva, who knew everything, looked pityingly at his beloved Sati, took her lovingly on his lap, and asked her what was troubling her. She said excitedly, "My Lord, my father is conducting a great sacrifice to which everybody is going. Why are we not going? Please let us go. I earnestly request you to go with me."

"My dearest one, don't you realize that those who go uninvited to another person's house are sure to be shown disrespect. We have not been invited, and so we should certainly not go for the *yajna*."

Sati's normally dark color became even darker and her black eyes flashed brilliantly at hearing these words of Shiva, and she said, "If you, O Lord, by whose presence all sacrifices become auspicious, have not been invited, then my father is surely guilty of a terrible crime. I must go to this sacrifice and ask him, as well as all those present there, why they have gone to a sacrifice to which you, Lord of all the worlds, have not been invited. So please give me permission to go."

Shiva realized that if he denied her, she would pine and die. He also knew that if she went, death awaited her. Sadly, he gave her permission to go. He told her to mount his own vehicle, the bull Nandi, and sent sixty thousand of his attendants to wait upon her and guard her if need arose. Sati bedecked herself and set out for her father's home with all the paraphernalia of royalty. The attendants followed her, holding the white umbrella of royalty above her head, waving gaily-colored banners and yak fans, and blaring conchs and trumpets. Shiva sadly watched her departure, knowing that he would never see her in this form again.

Sati reached her father's mansion, which was abounding with wondrous sights, and descended from Nandi and went inside alone. Her mother, Virini, and sisters greeted her with great delight, but Daksha pretended not to see her. Sati looked around and saw all the great souls of the world assembled there. She saw that seats had been allotted to all the deities except Shiva, and she became furious. Her eyes burned like red-hot coals and flashed with blue fire. Her tresses that had been tied became loose and disheveled. Her third eye, normally invisible in the middle of her forehead, opened and began to throb and quiver. Her aspect was fully that of Kaali, or the Destroyer.

In a thunderous voice she asked Daksha, "How is it that my husband, whose presence alone can make all functions complete, has not been invited? Any rite performed without him will be impure. I am ashamed to see how senseless and mean my own father has become." Turning to Vishnu, Brahma, and the other gods, she unleashed the full power of her anger on them, "Are you all so dense that you don't realize the greatness of Shiva? How could you come to a place that has been defiled by not having his holy feet step there?"

All kept quiet, but Daksha retorted, "Who asked you to come here when you were not invited? Knowing Shiva to be a coarse and uncultured type with indecent apparel and rude manners, I deliberately refrained from inviting him here. I rue the day that I gave you to that barbarian. However, now that you have come, you may stay. Kindly calm yourself and take your share of the sacrifice."

Sati was filled with anger and sorrow. "I scorn to accept your offer, O Daksha!" she flashed at him with fiery eyes. "My husband told me not to go. He warned me that I would be insulted but alas! I did not heed his words for love of you, my father. But now I see that you are despicable. I cannot bear to remain in this body that has come from you. No longer can I bear to be called Dakshayani (daughter of Daksha). Therefore I shall give up my body here and now, in front of all of you. I can never return to my beloved Lord with this body that has now become defiled. All those who reproach Shiva and all those who listen to these reproaches will go to hell, unless they remove themselves instantly from this hall."

Repentant, she thought of how she had overridden her Lord's advice not to go to the sacrifice. Turning to her father once again she said, "Shiva has matted hair, carries a skull in his hands, and resides in cremation grounds, but even the gods and sages keep the dust of his feet on their heads. You are wicked in every respect. I will have nothing further to do with this body born of you. This body born of your seed, I shall cast off as a corpse. It is worthy of contempt." So saying Sati retreated into silence. Turning to the north, she sat in yogic trance, covering her entire body with her upper garment. Fixing her mind on her Lord, she balanced the *prana* (inward breath, life force) and *apana* (exhalation) within her body, and lifted the *udana* (upward moving air) from her navel, taking it through her heart *chakra* and then into her throat *chakra,* and finally fixing it in the *ajna chakra* (spiritual center) in the middle of her forehead between her brows. Remembering her Lord alone, she left her body and entered the celestial regions.

There was a big commotion when Sati left her body. Everybody cried, "Fie on Daksha! Fie on this sacrifice!" and so on. Hearing the loud lamentations, the *ganas* of Shiva, who had been waiting at the door, now rushed in and started to shout and cry. With furious upraised weapons they charged Daksha and others and started to kill them. Some killed themselves because they feared Shiva's wrath if they returned without Sati. On seeing this, the sage Brighu invoked many

fearful spirits in order to stop the onslaught. Thousands of powerful spirits, called Rbhus, rose up, and a terrible fight ensued between the two parties, which ended in the *ganas* of Shiva being routed. They were forced to run for their lives back to Kailasa. At that time, a celestial voice declared that Daksha's sacrifice was doomed to end in a terrible way.

"Since Sati, mother of the universe, and Shiva, father of the universe, were not propitiated by you, misfortune shall befall you." Hearing this ethereal voice, everyone was stunned and stood aghast. Most of the people left the place. Others advised Daksha to propitiate Shiva immediately before further harm came to him.

Aum Namashivaya!

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Aum Viroopakshaya Namaha!

8

The Wrath of Shiva

O Destroyer of sin and sorrow!
Prostrations to your anger!
And then to your arrow, your bow, and your hands.

"Sri Rudrum," *Yajur Veda*

The frightened *ganas* ran back to Shiva and begged him to save them. They told him the whole sad story of how Sati had given up her body, because it had been born of a man who had insulted her Lord. Hearing this dreadful news Shiva became filled with sorrow, and out of his sorrow was born a terrible anger. He became Rudra, the Destroyer. His eyes were frowning and furious and emitted red and blue sparks of fire. Thus he got the name Virupaksha, the malignant-eyed. Jumping up from the rock on which he had been sitting, he wrenched out a lock of his matted hair and struck the mountain with it. A loud, explosive sound was heard, as of a huge rock being cleft. From one half of Shiva's locks there appeared an enormous being with the visage of Rudra, with thousands of hands blazing like firebrands; his name was Virabhadra. From the other half was born the goddess known as Bhadrakaali. She was dripping blood, fearsome to behold, with matted hair falling like a cape over her back, fiery red eyes emitting sparks like hot coals, red

tongue lolling out, and many hands brandishing upraised weapons.

In a thunderous voice Virabhadra spoke, "O Rudra of terrific appearance, with sun, moon, and fire for your eyes, command me quickly. What should I do? One who is devoted to you will always be victorious. With your favor there is nothing I cannot accomplish."

Shiva ordered Virabhadra and Bhadrakaali to march with the *ganas* to Daksha's sacrifice and destroy it completely. Virabhadra, who had the same features, dress, and embellishments as Rudra, went ahead in a chariot drawn by lions. Bhadrakaali went with him, accompanied by the nine Durgas (*navadurgas*)—Kaali, Kartyayani, Isani, Chamunda, Mundamardini, Bhadra, Mahakali, Twarita, and Vaishnavi—and many goblins. A host of angry furies, ghosts, ghouls, genies, monsters, dragons, demons, freaks, fiends, and spirits accompanied them. Three *crore* (10 million) of rabid canine species were born of the hair of Shiva. A virulent type of fever accompanied each of them.

As soon as this awesome contingent set out, many bad omens were noted in Daksha's *yaga*. The whole earth went into convulsions at the very spot of the *yaga*. Falling stars and comets were seen, and the sun became spotted and had terrifying circles around it. Thousands of vultures hovered around the spot. Jackals and dogs howled while a fierce tornado tore the *yajnashala* to pieces. Seeing the approach of Virabhadra's army, the earth with its oceans and continents shuddered in terror. Daksha ran to Vishnu and begged for mercy. Vishnu replied that he would have to pay for the insults he had dealt to Shiva, the great Lord—Maheswara. Daksha begged Indra and the other gods to help him, and they set out to fight the macabre army, but Virabhadra made short work of them and they fled in terror.

Then the horrific army began a methodical annihilation of the *yajnashala*. Some of them hacked the beams and superstructure while others attacked the inner apartments. One group destroyed the sacrificial fireplace, another the halls, and some the kitchens. Others shattered the sacred vessels and sacrificial hearths. Then they bound the officiating priests and chased the fleeing gods. Virabhadra pulled out

Brighu's beard, because he had ridiculed Shiva by twirling his moustache. He plucked out Bhaga's eyeballs, for he had rolled his eyes and encouraged Daksha to insult Shiva. He knocked out Pushan's teeth, for he had laughed, displaying all his teeth when Rudra was insulted. Then he tried to behead Daksha but found it impossible. He thought for a while and then realized that since Daksha had acted in a beastly way, he had to be tied to a stake and slaughtered like a sacrificial beast. Bhadrakaali dragged Daksha by the hair to the altar, and Virabhadra raised his axe and beheaded the patriarch. His lifeless corpse fell on the ground with a thud. Bhadrakaali drank the blood, and Virabhadra offered Daksha's head to the sacrificial fire. Bhadrakaali made a garland of the other heads that were rolling on the ground, while Virabhadra smeared his body with the blood. The two of them danced a macabre dance of victory in the eerie light of the dying embers, accompanied by the shouts and claps of the delighted *ganas*. Then, after setting fire to the whole campus, they returned victorious to their master. Shiva now came to be known as Hara, the ravisher.

In the meantime, the defeated gods went to Brahma and requested that he help them restore Daksha's sacrifice, since he had started it only after getting their promise that they would help him. Brahma as usual went along with them to the abode of Vishnu to beg, "O Lord of Lakshmi! O Lord of gods! We have come to invoke your aid in completing the *yajna* of Daksha."

Vishnu said, "O Brahma, since the gods have committed a sin in taking part in a *yaga* to which Shiva had not been invited, the only thing you can do now is to propitiate him by falling at his feet. Since I also have been guilty of attending the sacrifice, I will also accompany you. I attended the *yaga* only because Daksha is my devotee and I can never let down a devotee."

Thus all of them set out to the abode of Shiva in order to placate him. They saw him seated under the banyan tree with his left leg placed over his right thigh and knee. A garland of *rudraksha* beads was suspended from his left wrist and he was showing the *tarakamudra,* or

teaching position, with his right hand. This was the posture of Dakshinamurthy that he had shown Brahma and Vishnu at the time of creation. Seated on a mat of *darbha* grass, he was imparting the knowledge of the eternal Brahman to the sages. The crescent moon peeped through his matted locks, and his body was covered with ashes. He looked like the god of peace, for all his anger was spent. Friend of the world that he was, he always engaged in the practice of austerities for the good of all. Vishnu and the other gods approached him and made obeisance to him.

They said, "Obeisance to the great Lord, who is calm and peaceful, who is the benefactor of the universe. Noble souls always show extreme tolerance and never take revenge against those whose minds have come under the sway of the Lord's *maya*. Therefore, O Lord, it behooves you to forgive those who have been infatuated by *maya*. Kindly do what should be done to complete the *yajna* of Daksha, which has been defiled by your *ganas*. May the patriarch Daksha be revived and all those who have been wounded be made whole once again. O Rudra, may the entire remaining portion of the *yajna* be given over to you."

Hearing this, Rudra was pleased and said, "I did all this to purify Daksha and not out of revenge. That patriarch whose head was burnt will have the head of a goat in its place; Bhaga, whose eyes were gouged out, will have to see with the eyes of Mitra; and Pushan, who had his teeth knocked out, will have to eat powdered rice or eat with the teeth of the master of the *yajna*. Brighu will have the beard of a goat to replace the one he lost. All those priests and others who lost their limbs will have them restored."

Then at the request of the gods, Rudra proceeded with them to Kankhala, the place of the sacrifice. He commanded Virabhadra to bring Daksha's body to him. He did so, and Shiva told the gods to bring the head of the sacrificial goat and join it with Daksha's trunk. When Shiva cast his benign glance at the corpse, it came to life. Daksha, who had acted like a goat, now got the head of a goat. As soon as he saw Shiva standing before him, Daksha's mind, which had been

filled with hatred, became purified, and he started to extol him, even though his voice choked with emotion at the thought of his beloved daughter, who was no more.

Daksha said, "I thank you for giving me the punishment I deserved or else I would have been condemned to hell for having insulted such a noble personage as you. You are indeed Shankara, the benevolent one."

Daksha was now commanded by Rudra to complete the *yajna* with the help of other priests. All the gods extolled Shiva, and Daksha completed the *yajna* with all formality. At the conclusion of the *yaga*, Iswara himself, in the form of Sri Hari, appeared and blessed the participants of the *yaga*.

Sri Hari spoke, "O learned ones! Know me to be the supreme cause of the world, the sole witness of everything, the self-effulgent being, attributeless and undecaying. I assume different names, such as Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, for the purposes of creation, maintenance, and destruction. This is done through my *yoga-maya,* which has the three *gunas* of *sattva, rajas,* and *tamas*. The ignorant man sees Brahma, Vishnu, and Rudra as different, even though they are all in me, the all-comprehensive Brahman. Just as a man will not see the different parts of his body as different from himself, so also one who has taken refuge in me will see all beings as parts of me. He attains eternal peace who does not perceive any difference among the three—Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva—who are one in nature and who pervade all beings."

Thus blessing all those who were there, Sri Hari vanished from view, and the gods returned to their respective abodes. Though he had forgiven Daksha, Shiva was filled with agony at the loss of his beloved Sati. Picking up her lifeless corpse, he wandered over the whole universe carrying her lifeless body in his arms. His *ganas* followed him silently, tears rolling down their cheeks, not knowing how to console their Lord. Their mournful cries rent the galaxies and created havoc in the world. Brahma realized that this had to stop or else the whole universe would be drowned in Shiva's sorrow. He appealed to Vishnu, who wielded his discus, the Sudarshana Chakra, and let it fly with great

precision toward Shiva. It cut the corpse of Sati into 108 pieces. Those places where the pieces fell are known as *Shakti peethas* and are spots of great psychic power, capable of granting boons to all who worship there.

When the body of Sati was destroyed, there was nothing left but memories to remind Shiva of his beloved. With his divine insight he knew that Sati could never be destroyed for she was Shivaa, a part of his own being, and that she would resurrect herself in another place at another time. In the meantime he could no longer bear to live in the place where he had enjoyed all types of pleasures with Sati. He isolated himself in the icy mountain caves of the Himalayas and became a recluse once more.

Aum Namashivaya!

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Aum Kapardine Namaha!

9

Parvati Seeks Her Lord

He rejoices in having as His lifemate the Mountain Maid, whose gait is like the female elephant and the female swan.

SAINT SAMBANDAR

As mentioned earlier, Daksha had sixty daughters, of whom Svadha was given in marriage to the *manes*. Svadha had three daughters, of whom Mena was the eldest, Dhanya was second, and Kalavati, third. Once the three sisters went to the abode of Vishnu in order to have *darshan* (a vision) of the Lord. A great concourse of sages and yogis was there. It so happened that the four boy sages known as Sanaka, Sanandana, Sanatana, and Sanatkumara also arrived to pay obeisance to the Lord. Seeing them, the entire assembly of sages rose up in respect. Submerged in their own thoughts, the three sisters did not rise. Seeing this lack of respect, Sanaka and the others, though steeped in bliss always, became angry in order to fulfill the inscrutable purpose of the Lord. They cursed the sisters that they would be born as human beings on the earth. On hearing this, the sisters became very sad and fell at their feet begging for forgiveness.

Sanaka then said, "The curse of a sage is always for the benefit

of the world, so you should not worry. Mena will become the wife of Himavan, who is actually a part of Lord Vishnu. The goddess Shakti will be born as Mena's daughter and will be known as Parvati; she will become the wife of Lord Shiva. The second, Dhanya, will become a great *yogini* and wife of the great saint-king of Videha known as Janaka. Lakshmi herself will be born as her daughter and will be called Sita. She will become the wife of Vishnu in his incarnation as Rama. The third sister, Kalavati, will be born into a Vaishya family of cowherds and will be married to Vrishabhanu; Radha will be born as her daughter. This Radha who is now a resident of Goloka will be the beloved of Krishna." The sisters were very happy when they heard this and thanked the sages for their curse, which was actually a blessing, not only to them but also to the whole world.

Along the northern boundary of Bharatavarsha stands the great mountain known as Himalaya, or the abode of snow. It has a twofold aspect: one is the *achala,* or immovable aspect, and the other aspect has form. In this human form he is known as Himavan and is king of all mountains. The Himalaya is the storehouse of various gems and medicinal herbs, and many fierce animals live there. Even the gods love to sport amongst the lofty peaks. Sages from ancient times have found that these regions are saturated with spirituality. It is no wonder the place came to be called the Land of the Gods.

Himavan, Lord of the Himalayas, desired to marry and asked the gods to find a suitable mate for him. The gods approached the *manes* and asked them to give their daughter Mena to him, since great benefit would accrue to all beings from this alliance. Remembering the words of the sages, they agreed joyfully, and the beautiful Mena was given in marriage to Himavan. Vishnu and the other gods attended the grand function.

Soon after that, Shiva married Sati and the divine couple took up their abode near Himavan and Mena. As soon as she saw Sati, Mena wished for a daughter just like her and offered Sati many delicacies. Sati knew of Mena's wish, and at the time of casting off her body, made the wish to be reborn as Mena's daughter.

Seeing Shiva take to the life of a recluse, the gods decided to persuade him to get married once again.

They eulogized Durga, or Shivaa, the feminine counterpart of Shiva and asked her to take birth as the daughter of Himavan and Mena. "O goddess! You are Gayatri, mother of the Vedas; Savitri, glory of the sun; and Saraswati, goddess of knowledge. To those who perform good actions you are Lakshmi, goddess of fortune; to sinners, you are the goddes of ignominy. Your smile brings peace for the universe and your frown, war. You are the Divine Mother of all creatures."

The goddess appeared before them seated in a bejeweled chariot drawn by lions. Her luster surpassed that of a *crore* of suns. Seeing this wondrous form, the gods bowed and begged her to take on a body once more. "O divine Mother! Formerly you were born as the daughter of Daksha and married Shiva. Ever since you cast off your body, Shiva has been inconsolable. The purpose of your incarnation is still to be fulfilled, so please deign to take birth once again as the daughter of Himavan and Mena, so that all may be happy."

The goddess promised to comply with their request, and the gods asked Mena to do rigorous austerities in order to have the goddess as her daughter. Mena passed twenty-seven years observing vows and fasts in order to propitiate the goddess, who eventually appeared before her and blessed her, and promised to incarnate herself as her daughter.

As soon as she became pregnant, Mena shone with a divine radiance. Her husband, Himavan, was bent on satisfying her every wish and loaded her with gifts of love. At the time of the divine birth, all the stars and planets were in auspicious positions. The gods rained flowers from above as Himavan's wife gave birth to the divine child. The whole of Himavan's country rejoiced, and the happy father gave many gifts to the poor. The child was called Kaali, as well as Parvati. She shone in dark splendor like a blue lotus.

As a child she used to play with her friends on the banks of the Ganga with balls and dolls, as would any ordinary child. Though the parents had many heroic sons, their fond gaze always followed the antics of their

beloved daughter. Once the sage Narada went to their abode. Seeing the sage, Himavan was very happy and asked him to look at his daughter's palm and foretell her future.

Narada did so and said, "O Mena! O Himavan! There is no doubt that this daughter of yours has a remarkable future. She has all auspicious signs. She will heighten the glory of her parents and delight her husband. But there is one abnormal sign on her palm—her husband will be a naked yogi without any qualities. He will have neither mother nor father and will be quite indifferent to honor or dishonor. He will be free from lust, and his manner and dress will appear inauspicious."

Hearing the words of the sage, the parents were most distressed, but Parvati was delighted for she knew the description to be true of Shiva, whom she had already wed in her mind.

Seeing the distress of the parents, Narada comforted them with these words, "O Lord of mountains, don't be unhappy. Lord Shiva will be her bridegroom, and he fits in with all that I have said. In him there is neither good nor bad, neither auspicousness nor inauspiciousness. Let her propitiate him with austerities and no doubt he will agree to marry her. Love such as is found between the two of them will not be found anywhere else. With Parvati as his consort, Shiva will become Ardhanareeswara, or half-male and half-female, with Parvati forming part of his body. By propitiating Shiva with her penance, she will acquire the luster of gold and be given the name Gauri."

Himavan had another doubt. "O celestial sage, I have heard it said that Lord Shiva is totally immersed in *tapasya* and abhors all contact with anyone, especially women. I have heard that he made a promise to his wife Sati that he would never take another wife, so how will he agree to marry my daughter, Parvati?"

Narada smilingly replied, "Have no fears, O Himavan! This daughter of yours was formerly the daughter of Daksha and was known as Sati. It is she who has now reincarnated herself as Parvati. There is no doubt that she will become Shiva's wife. You have now placed her on your lap, but her permanent abode will be on Shiva's lap." Thus com-

forting the Lord of the mountains, Narada took his lute and departed on his perpetual errand of going from world to world, singing the praises of the Lord.

Even though Mena wanted a handsome husband for her daughter, she heeded her husband's advice and encouraged Parvati to do penance in order to secure Lord Shiva as her husband.

Himavan said, "The word 'inauspicious' cannot be used in connection with Shiva. He is the soul of all auspiciousness. So advise your daughter to do continuous *tapasya* with the aim of getting Shiva as her husband. Only good will accrue to her from this."

Mena went to her daughter to advise her, but on seeing her slender frame, the mother's heart was filled with pity, and she was unable to tell her to perform *tapasya*. Parvati understood her mother's reluctance and said, "O mother, yesterday I had a dream in which a sage came and asked me to perform penance for Shiva."

Himavan also said that he'd had a dream in which an ascetic, whom he later came to recognize as Shiva, came to his city and stayed there. So the parents decided to wait till the dream came true. Sure enough, soon after, an ascetic, who was none other than Lord Shiva, came to Himavan's territory with a few of his *ganas* in order to do penance. Himavan went to welcome him and told him of his desire to serve him to the best of his ability.

Shiva was pleased and said, "I have come to this mountain to perform penance, and the only service you can render me is to see that I am left undisturbed by everyone."

Himavan agreed and gave an order that no one should disturb the Lord. Then he took some fruits and flowers and, accompanied by his daughter, went to the Lord and said, "My Lord, my daughter is very eager to serve you. Please consent to accept her service along with her two maids."

Shiva took one look at Parvati, who was beautiful beyond words in the first flush of youth, and hurriedly closed his eyes. Her complexion was like a blue lotus, her budding breasts ended in a slender waist that

could be spanned by his two hands, and her black curls shone with a divine luster. Turning to Himavan, he said that in future he should come alone, without his daughter, "A woman is a phase of illusion. A young woman is a hindrance to ascetics. I am an ascetic, a yogi, what use would I have for a young woman as beautiful as your daughter?" Himavan was dumb and did not know what to say. But Parvati spoke up with the courage of love.

"O Lord," she said, "have you considered the fact that all activity comes under Prakriti? Even this activity of *tapasya* can be done only because you are under the sway of Prakriti."

Shiva replied, "I am destroying Prakriti with my penance. In reality I am without the attributes of Prakriti."

Parvati replied, "Don't you know that I am Prakriti and you are Purusha? Without me you are actionless, attributeless, and qualityless. You are also incomprehensible."

Shiva laughed and said, "O Parvati! I see that you are a champion of the Sankhya system, but seem to know little of Vedanta. Know me to be the Supreme Brahman, unsullied by illusion, beyond the workings of Prakriti, comprehensible only through spiritual knowledge. You cannot affect me, even though you are Prakriti."

Parvati replied, "If, as you say, you are superior to Prakriti, then why should you do *tapasya* at all, and why should you be afraid of my being near you?"

Shiva was delighted with her quick repartee and said with a smile, "Very well, Parvati. See what you can do to me! You may render me whatever service you please."

Elated with her success, Parvati returned home with her father. After that she went daily with her maids and served the three-eyed God, her chosen deity, with great devotion. She washed his feet and drank the holy water and wiped his feet with a cloth warmed by fire. She worshipped him with the prescribed sixteen types of offerings. Sometimes she sang exquisite songs and sometimes danced. After cleaning the glade in which he was doing *tapasya,* with her own hands with

a wattle broom, she returned to her own abode. Many years elapsed like this with the Lord immersed in *tapasya* and never noticing what she was doing. At last one day he came to know of her activities and thought to himself, "She is acting with perfect self-control and great devotion, but there are still some traces of ego left in her. These can be erased only after she herself performs penance."

Thinking thus, the Lord reverted to his state of *samadhi* and did not notice her any more. Parvati continued to serve him, day after day, unperturbed by his apparent indifference.

In the meantime Brahma and the other gods were getting a bit worried. They were being harassed by the demon Taraka and knew that the only one who could destroy him was the offspring of Shiva and Parvati. But a consummation of their union seemed to be a remote prospect, so they decided to employ Kama, the god of love, to aid them.

Aum Namashivaya!

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Aum Kamaraye Namaha!

10
The Defeat of Kama

He dances while the host of ghouls stand round Him
and sing.
A river has He atop the matted coil of His locks.
The Vedas set to the notes of music does He sing.

SAINT SAMBANDAR

As has been mentioned before, thirteen of the daughters of the patriarch Daksha were married to the great sage Kashyapa. Of these, the eldest, Diti, had an evil mind and was the mother of all the demons. Aditi, her sister, who was of a noble disposition, was the mother of the gods. Once Diti approached her husband and begged him to give her a son who would be capable of defeating the gods who were the sons of her sister, Aditi.

Kashyapa was a man who knew that it was useless to try to reason with his wife Diti, who had a crooked mind, so he did not try to argue with her but advised her to perform certain austerities. She did this with alacrity and eventually gave birth to a son called Vajranga, who had adamantine limbs resembling the hardness of diamonds, as his name implies. At the bidding of his mother he captured Indra and the other gods and punished them. Aditi, who was the mother of the

gods, complained to Brahma, who approached Vajranga and begged him to release the gods. Vajranga was a devotee of Shiva and, pleased with Brahma's gentle approach, he released the gods. "I did this only to please my mother," he said. "In reality I have no desire to conquer the worlds. I would rather be instructed by you on the essence of life, by which I can always remain happy and free from fear."

Brahma was very pleased with this son of Diti, and he created a beautiful woman called Varangi, whom he gave to Vajranga as his wife. They lived happily for some time, and Varangi delighted him with her service and love. He asked her to choose whatever boon she wanted. She immediately asked for a son who would conquer the three worlds and cause misery to Vishnu. Vajranga was in a dilemma when he heard this strange request from his dutiful wife. He certainly did not want enmity with the gods, neither could he afford to displease his wife. He decided to do *tapasya* to Brahma and ask him for the boon of a good son and thus please his wife without harming the gods. At the end of the period of austerities, Brahma appeared before him and granted the boon. His wife conceived and delivered in due time. The child had an enormous body, and at the time of his birth, many evil portents were seen in the world. Vajranga realized that his son was a demon as wished by his wife and named him Taraka.

The demon performed severe penance for many years to Brahma, and when Brahma appeared, Taraka requested from him two boons. One was that none should equal him in strength in all the three worlds, and the other was that only a son of Shiva could kill him. He knew Shiva to be a yogi and thought the possibility of Shiva begetting a son was remote. As usual, Brahma weakly agreed to both requests.

The demon then started committing atrocities in all the three worlds and afflicted gods and humans alike. Whatever he wanted he took by force, whether from gods, sages, or humans. Since he had all the three worlds under his control, he declared himself to be Indra, king of gods. Dismissing the gods, he installed demons in their places. As usual, the gods with Indra as their leader approached Brahma and

begged him to do something. Brahma was the cause of all their troubles due to his indiscriminate giving of boons to fiends like Taraka. Brahma said that it would not be proper for him to kill Taraka, since Taraka was his devotee.

"But I have a remedy for you," he said. "The only person who is capable of killing him is the son of Shiva. This is the boon that I myself have given him. However, as you know, at the moment Shiva is deep in *samadhi* and refuses to look at Parvati, the daughter of Himavan, who is serving him with great devotion. It is up to you to see that he weds Parvati and begets a son. Only the offspring of his seed is capable of killing Tarakasura."

Hearing this, Indra immediately thought of Kama, who appeared before him in all his beauty, accompanied by his wife Rati and Vasanta, the spring season. Indra requested him to go to the Himalayas and use all his wiles in order to persuade Shiva to look on Parvati with favor. "Go and fill Shiva's heart with desire for Parvati. Force him to give up his *tapasya* and embrace the entrancing princess of the mountains," said Indra.

Kama was very conceited. He was proud of his prowess and thought himself to be superior to the gods, since even they fell victim to his fatal arrows. He told Indra proudly that he was capable of accomplishing certain things that even the king of gods could not do.

He proceeded to Himavan's abode and stationed himself at a place close to where Lord Shiva was doing *tapasya*. Spring spread her exquisite carpet of flowers and covered the trees with fragrant flowers and fruits. The warm *malaya* breeze swept across the icy peaks, enfolding them with the scent of exotic blooms. The snow melted and turned into gurgling rivers and limpid pools in which lotuses blossomed. All the birds were busy making nests, and their excited love calls filled the air. The cooing of cuckoos and the buzzing of excited, inebriated bees, drunk with nectar, caused waves of delight to course through the minds of even the sages who were meditating there. The *apsaras* (celestial dancers) who had accompanied Kama danced in joy and abandon.

The full moon rose in splendor, scattering its brilliance, inviting lovers to dally beneath its gentle glow. When Shiva opened his eyes and observed this untimely intrusion of spring into his austere, wintry hermitage, he was a little puzzled, but perfect yogi that he was, he closed his eyes and slipped into *samadhi* once more. Then Kama, who was usually to be felt only in the minds of people, took on his exquisite form and stood on Shiva's left side with Rati beside him. The loving couple then began their dalliance, using all sorts of enticing gestures. With music provided by the celestials, they started to dance in front of the great yogi, but they could not find any difference in his demeanor. Kama felt the beginnings of fear that this might be his first defeat. So far he had never come across anyone other than Shiva who could resist his wiles. Just then Parvati came along with her maids, bringing various kinds of flowers for her morning worship of the Lord. As usual she approached Shiva timidly, bowed to him, and placed flowers one by one at his feet. Then she stood shyly before him, hoping he would open his eyes and look at her. Shiva opened his eyes for a split second, and Kama took the opportunity to shoot his arrow of flowers from his mango bow straight at the trident-bearing Lord. Usually, even if Shiva happened to open his eyes for a few moments, it was his practice to close them again and return calmly to his meditation. Such was his control. But this time, thanks to Kama's intervention, he was unable to tear his gaze away from Parvati's intoxicating form. He stared at her as if mesmerized, and Parvati, who had been longing and waiting for this day, gazed deep into his eyes.

Shiva thought to himself, "She is indeed a storehouse of perfection. There is no one to equal her in beauty in all the three worlds. If I feel so much pleasure just by looking at her, think of the pleasure to be derived from embracing her!"

He was on the point of stretching out his hands to touch her when he stopped and thought, "How is it that I have fallen prey to the pangs of love? Who has caused my fall?" Thinking thus he turned his head and saw Kama standing proudly on his left with Rati beside him. He

was holding his bow taut, ready to discharge a second arrow. As the arrow sped fearlessly from his bow, he felt the full blast of Shiva's anger sweep over him. Kama trembled with fear and mentally invoked the help of Indra. The gods with Indra appeared immediately on the scene, but before they could say anything to appease the wrath of Shiva, he opened his third eye and a great flame of fire sprang from the middle of his forehead and shot up to the sky like a fiery meteor. It dropped to the earth and covered the ground, engulfing the trembling Kama and reducing him to a heap of ashes in a trice. Rati, the consort of Kama, fell to the ground in a swoon. Parvati was trembling with fright and was led away by her maids. The gods were frightened out of their wits and did not know how to comfort the sorrow-stricken Rati. She was groveling on the ground trying to gather the remnants of the ashes that the wind had not swept away. They begged Shiva to restore her husband to life.

"What have you done to my husband?" cried Rati. "You have condemned all creatures to live a life devoid of love. Society will collapse if love is destroyed. The bull will forsake the cow, the horse the mare, the bees the flowers, and man his wife. Desire is not just the cause of suffering but is also the basis of all joy. What is life without desire? It is mere existence alone with no flavor, like a flower without perfume. The essence of joy can be known only by one who has experienced suffering. Life has its price, which is suffering, but it also has its reward, which is joy, and neither can exist without Kama."

Shiva's anger was always short-lived, and he admitted the truth of Rati's words. "I destroyed Kama's body but not his spirit. He will live on as Ananga, the bodiless one, in the heart of every creature. He will also be born with form as Pradyumna, the son of Krishna, during the time of the Krishnavatara and you, O Rati, will once more become his wife." So saying Shiva returned to his austere practices. Parvati did not dare to go there any longer for she was fearful of the consequences of his wrath, which she had just seen.

Prostrations to the one who is in white autumn clouds and the sun. Prostrations to the one who is in storms and deluges. Prostrations to the protector of land and cattle.

"Sri Rudrum," *Yajur Veda*

Prostrations to the one present in cowsheds and houses. Prostrations to the one in homesteads and palaces. Prostrations to the one in thorny bushes and mountain caves. Prostrations to the one in whirlpools and dewdrops.

"Sri Rudrum," *Yajur Veda*

Aum Namashivaya!

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Aum Shankaraya Namaha!

11

Parvati's Penance

The pure One who abides eternally in the heart of the soul dear to Him,
And who pays obeisance to Him.
The Lord of the four cardinal points and of the noble Devi.

Saint Thirumoolar

Parvati returned home highly agitated and disturbed in her mind. *Of what use is physical beauty,* she thought, *if it cannot affect my Lord? He is a true yogi, and I see that the only thing that can affect him is the power of austerity and not that of physical charm.* Her parents and brothers tried to comfort her, but all in vain. At last the celestial sage Narada came to her and told her:

"O Parvati! Do not be despondent. You will surely win Lord Shiva as your husband. He did not accept you because you still have some traces of ego. In the pride of your youth and beauty, you thought you could subjugate the three-eyed one by your charm alone. But remember, he is the Mahayogi. He can be beguiled only by the force of intense penance. I will impart to you the knowledge of the sacred *mantra* that is especially dear to Shiva. It is the five-syllabled *mantra,*

'Aum namashivaya.' Those who repeat this with faith and assiduity will undoubtedly be able to please him."

Parvati then went to her parents for their consent to go to the forest in order to do penance. Her father gave his consent, but her mother, Mena, was most reluctant to allow her daughter to go. "Can you not perform penance in the house?" she asked. "All conveniences are here. It is not correct for a young woman such as you to go alone and perform *tapasya* in the forest. That is meant only for ascetics." Parvati acquired the name Uma, meaning "don't go," from these words of her mother. She was crestfallen at Mena's words and could not eat or drink for thinking of Shiva. Seeing her daughter in this miserable condition, Mena reluctantly gave her consent.

Discarding all her finery and jewels, Parvati donned the bark of a tree, tied at the waist with a belt of grass. Accompanied by her two maids she went to the high ridge where Shiva had been doing *tapasya* and where Kama had been reduced to ashes. Seeing that place where Shiva used to sit, she was filled with sorrow and wept aloud, crying out his name again and again. At last, controlling herself with difficulty, she made preparations for worship. She built an altar on which she kept a *linga* of Shiva. There she sat and repeated the five-syllabled *mantra,* constantly keeping Shiva in mind. In summer she sat in the midst of five fires. In the monsoon she sat in the rain, and in winter she sat amidst the snow, all the while chanting the sacred *mantra* without respite. She bore with fortitude the heat of summer, the icy gusts of the autumn wind, and the harsh snowfall of the Himalayan winter. For the first year she subsisted on only fruits, and the next year, only on leaves, thus acquiring the name Aparna, or one who exists on leaves. In the third year she gave up even leaves and fasted on ether alone. Clad in bark, with matted hair, restraining all her natural instincts, she surpassed even the sages in her austerity.

Even nature was thrilled by the power of her penance. Abundant flowers bloomed so that she was never short of blossoms for worship. Natural-born enemies in the animal world became friendly and shed

their animosity, and roamed freely in the vicinity of the sacred grove. Year after year passed, and still Shiva did not appear. Himavan and Mena came to Parvati and tried their best to dissuade their daughter from continuing this fruitless *tapasya,* but she would not listen to them; she was confident that Shiva would succumb to the power of her penance. Her parents returned to their home, and Parvati redoubled her *tapasya* until all the worlds became unbearably hot due to the force of her penance. The gods could not understand the reason for this terrible change of climatic conditions. They approached Brahma and begged him to do something, so Brahma went with them to the abode of Vishnu and requested that he help them.

Vishnu smiled and said, "The change in seasons has been caused by the intensity of Parvati's *tapasya*. Therefore I shall go with you to the place where Lord Shiva is sitting in *samadhi* and request that he go to Parvati and grant her desire."

The gods were frightened of approaching Shiva, fearing his anger, but Vishnu assured them of his protection, and they accompanied him with great trepidation. Shiva was in deep *samadhi,* so the gods asked his attendant, Nandi, to apprise him of their arrival. Shiva was pleased to grant them audience, and they placed their request to him.

Vishnu spoke, "O Lord! All the gods are being harassed by the *asura* Taraka. Considering you to be a confirmed celibate, he secured a boon from Brahma that he cannot be killed by anyone except a child born of your loins. Parvati, the daughter of the mountains, is at present doing severe penance in the hope of getting you as her husband. You alone can save the world from the harassment of the demon Taraka by accepting Parvati's hand in marriage. Due to her intense *tapasya,* all the three worlds are being heated. Save us all, O Lord! Desist from your penance, for the good of the world."

Shiva replied with a sly remark, "If Parvati were to be accepted by me, Kama would come alive once again, and this would prove injurious to all of you as well as the sages, for his presence is bound to spoil your meditation. As you know, lust always leads to hell. From lust comes

anger, from anger comes delusion, and delusion destroys penance. Why do you still insist on my marrying Parvati?" So saying, Shiva remained silent.

Vishnu spoke once again. "Do you not know that Parvati is none other than Sati, who has been born again as the daughter of the mountains? She is performing intense penance, and all the three worlds have been engulfed in the heat of her *tapasya*. We are all anxious to see the consummation of your marriage with Parvati. Only the son of this union is capable of killing the demon Taraka. So kindly accede to our request and bring joy to us as well as to Parvati."

Shiva now spoke, "O Vishnu! Marriage is a great fetter for a yogi. There are many bondages in the world, but association with women is the strongest of them all. Salvation is inaccessible for one who is drawn to worldly enjoyment. My reason tells me not to accede to your request, but my heart says otherwise. I have always been a slave of my devotees and can refuse them nothing. I am willing to give up my own interests in order to serve yours. Although I am not interested in marriage, I shall marry Parvati in order to please you and beget a son."

So saying, he lapsed into silence, and the gods returned to their respective abodes. Shiva then called the seven celestial sages and asked them to go and test Parvati's resolve. They proceeded to the peak called Gaurishankar, in order to test her. Seeing her emaciated form shining with the brilliance of intense austerity, they bowed to her and advised her to give up her penance, for Shiva would never yield to her request.

"The sage Narada, who advised you to do *tapasya,* is a beguiler. He always tries to turn people away from the worldly path to a life of austerity. He stopped the thousand sons of Daksha and forced them to follow the path of asceticism, much to the chagrin of their father, who had sent them forth in order to propagate children. He even advised the *asura* boy, Prahlada, to be devoted to Vishnu, with the result that he was forced to undergo great pain and censure from his father. Now he is doing his best to divert you also. Shiva is indifferent to women and not capable of giving love. In fact, he is the enemy of Kama. His

looks are most inauspicious, and he has neither name nor pedigree. Stop this fruitless task, therefore, and return to your parents and marry someone more suited to your gentle nature."

Parvati laughed and replied, "O sages, no doubt what you have said is true according to your understanding, but it cannot affect my determination in the least. As you know I'm the daughter of the mountains, and I cannot be moved so easily. Hence my name is also Achala. Shiva is the supreme yogi. He is not interested in embellishments. He is the Supreme Brahman, and if he does not marry me, I shall remain a virgin. I swear to this. The sun may rise in the west, fire may become cool, and Mount Meru may be seen to move and lotuses to bloom on rock, but my words shall never be false. I shall continue to worship Shiva until He comes to me. Or else I shall give up my body here and now."

The sages were delighted at Parvati's determination. They returned and reported the whole dialogue to Shiva. Now Shiva himself set out for Parvati's hermitage in order to test her. Actually he was quite convinced of her tenacity but wanted to have a glimpse of her in her ascetic's garb. He appeared before her in the guise of a very old sage carrying an umbrella and staff. Parvati rose up to honor the old man and worshipped him with all due reverence, and he inquired about her birth and parentage and why she was undergoing such severe penance. Parvati replied, "I am Parvati, daughter of Himavan and Mena. I am doing penance only with a view to getting Lord Shiva as my husband. But it looks as if my *tapasya* has been in vain, for he has not come. I have decided to consign this body of mine into the fire and hope to be born again. In every birth I will continue to do penance until Lord Shiva accepts me."

Shiva was secretly delighted by her reply, but in order to test her resolve further, he urged her to desist from this extreme act. Undaunted, Parvati merely smiled and after saluting him, she jumped into the fire that she had kept ready. But the fire became as cool as sandalwood paste. The old man smilingly stopped her from making another fire and urged her to repeat the whole story to him. Parvati

could not speak due to tears choking her voice. Her friend Vijaya narrated the sad tale.

The ascetic then demanded to hear it once again from Parvati's lips. Parvati repeated it and begged the old man to advise her.

The old man said, "O gentle lady, why do you wish to get Shiva as your husband? His body is always smeared with ashes from the cremation ground. His hair is matted, and he has snakes twining round his neck. Sometimes he is clad in the hide of a tiger and an elephant, and sometimes naked. He moves about either in isolation or followed by ghosts and goblins. He is a most unsuitable husband for one as beautiful as you. He had a wife called Sati, the daughter of Daksha, who was discarded by her father due to her association with Shiva. At last the poor girl had to give up her life. You are a jewel among women. Why do you want to wed this strange man? Why do you reject the pleasures of a palace in hopes of roaming in the forest with such a man? He doesn't have a single quality that could appeal to a woman. He killed your friend Kama and insulted you by going off somewhere else. I advise you to turn your mind away from him and find a more suitable bridegroom."

Parvati was furious when she heard this and retorted, "Why have you come here with these insufferable insinuations against my Lord? You will never be able to turn me away from my course of action. A person as devoid of discrimination as you are can never know the true form of my Lord, which is that of the Supreme Brahman, devoid of attributes. You say he is full of inauspicious qualities, yet I know that just by thinking of him everything will become auspicious. I have done great wrong in giving hospitality to one who obviously hates my Lord. Whatever Shiva may be, I love him. He alone is my Lord, and I want none other."

Averting her face, she asked her friend to chase away this base prophet who would no doubt continue to pour calumny on her Lord. She turned away in disgust and was on the point of running from him when Shiva assumed his own form and caught her hand.

"Where are you going, leaving me alone? I will not be discarded by you so easily, O Parvati!" he said, teasingly. "I am delighted by your persistence, and I've come here only to grant you all the boons you desire. You have paid the price for my love by your penance. From today onward, I am your slave. Command me and I shall oblige. You are my eternal companion and have always been so. Forgive me for testing you unbearably like this, but you have passed all the tests, and I am your ardent slave. Come with me to my abode in the Himalayas." So saying, he pulled the hand that was already clasped in his.

Parvati was delighted and replied, "My Lord, formerly I was Daksha's daughter but at that time our marriage rites were not properly performed. The planets had not been propitiated. This time I beg of you to approach my father and ask for my hand, and let our marriage be performed with all due rites and paraphernalia."

"O sweet Parvati," said Shiva, "this entire world is a world of illusion. I stand above all prophecies and planets, but if it is your wish to perform our marriage rites by propitiating all the planets in the customary way, it shall be done, for there is nothing that I can refuse you. I shall go to your father and beg for your hand as you wish." Parvati returned joyfully to her home and Shiva to his. The gods and *ganas* rejoiced.

Parvati was welcomed back with all due honors after her successful completion of her mission. Soon after, Shiva assumed the guise of a mendicant dancer and came to Himavan's court. He sang and danced so beautifully that everybody was thrilled. He blew the horn and played the drum. Mena was entranced. So was Parvati, but suddenly he allowed her to see his wonderful form as Shiva. On seeing this, she fainted and had to be revived. It seemed to her that he was asking her, "Do you want a boon or a groom?"

She whispered, "I have already chosen the boon. I want you as my groom." No one else was privileged to hear this intimate dialogue.

Mena was delighted with the dancer and offered him money as well as many precious gems. But he refused all. At last she asked him what

he wanted, and he replied that he wanted her daughter. She was furious when she heard this and ordered her attendants to drive him out of the town, but none could touch him. He was burning to the touch. Suddenly he vanished before their astounded eyes.

The gods were bewildered by Shiva's *lilas* and begged him once again to accede to their wishes and ask Himavan for his daughter's hand. This time Shiva went in the guise of a noble Brahmin, a member of the priest caste. He had a garland of crystal beads in his hands and a *saligrama* (stone typifying Vishnu) round his neck and was repeating the name of Vishnu. Only Parvati saw through his disguise and mentally bowed to him, and had a good laugh at the joke. The Brahmin strongly advised Himavan not to give his daughter to a mendicant such as Shiva. He then left as he had come. Hearing this, Mena begged her husband not to give her daughter to such a strange person.

In the meantime Shiva called the seven celestial sages and commanded them to go to Himavan and urge him to give his daughter to Shiva, for that was her desire and he had already granted her this boon. They joyfully went to Himavan and said, "Shiva is the father of the universe and Parvati, the mother. Hence it behooves you to give your daughter to him alone. By this gift your life will be fulfilled."

Himavan replied, "I, too, am anxious to do this, but ever since a certain Brahmin came here and denounced Shiva, my wife has been against it and refuses to give our daughter to him."

Then Arundhati, wife of Vasishta, approached Mena and advised her to give Parvati to Shiva, for that was the wish of the gods and only by the consummation of this union could the terrible demon Taraka be killed.

The sages told Himavan, "Parvati was born to be the wife of Shiva. She is the great cosmic intellect, mother of the universe. You will gain honor and glory only if you give her in marriage to Shiva." After hearing all this Mena was pacified and agreed to the betrothal. The sages returned and gave the news to the great god, and all preparations were started for the consummation of this joyful event.

Prostrations to the one in stones and dust. Prostrations to the one in dry grass and green. Prostrations to the one in deserts and fields.

"Sri Rudrum," *Yajur Veda*

He whose existence and reality shine always and uniformly in all the states of the body, such as infancy, and so on. And of our mind, such as waking, and so on. And who reveals the highest knowledge of the Atman by merely showing the jnanamudra *[spiritual knowledge symbol], to that Dakshinamurthy, the Supreme Being, embodied in the benign Guru, I offer my profound salutation.*

"Dakshinamurthy Stotram"
by Adi Shankara

Aum Namashivaya!

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Aum Srikandaya Namaha!

12

The Cosmic Wedding

Shore, sea, and mountains, and my words as well He permeates,
The unique one, He of the land of Rudra,
Husband of the handsome hill maid,
King of the heavenly ones.

Saint Vanthodar

Himavan was determined that the wedding should be the grandest event ever held in the universe. All the gods and the sages, as well as the mountains and rivers, were invited. The entire city was decorated in a fantastic manner. The roads were swept and watered. Plantain trees, silken festoons, and mango leaves lined the streets. Auspicious items were placed at every street corner, and jasmine buds and lotus flowers strewn on the ground. Himavan invited the divine architect to design a special dais with images of all the gods, to seat the bridal couple. He did this so realistically that everyone thought the gods had already arrived. Different mansions were made for each of the gods with the best one reserved for the bridegroom, Shiva.

On the appointed day, all the gods assembled at Kailasa in order to accompany the bridegroom. They begged Shiva to dress as befitting a

bridegroom. He smiled and complied with their request. The crescent moon took the place of a crown, his third eye became a beautiful jewel on his forehead, the serpents near his ears turned into earrings, and the serpents round his neck into necklaces. The ashes became sweet-smelling sandalwood paste, and the elephant hide became a silken garment. Thus they set out with great joy. *Ganas* from all the worlds joined the procession, dancing and prancing in front. The gods, too, were in a very jovial mood and sang and danced. The tumultuous sound of *damarus* (drums), *dundhubhis* (percussion instruments), and conchs filled the quarters. Vishnu, seated on the Garuda (eagle vehicle of Lord Vishnu) accompanied by Lakshmi, went first; Indra on the Airavata (white elephant) followed, as did Brahma on the swan with Saraswati beside him. The mothers of the universe, the celestial virgins, and the wives of the gods all went ahead with great joy to attend Shiva's wedding. Lord Shiva, seated on his white bull of crystal purity and beauty, the symbol of *dharma,* shone with a divine luster in the midst of this auspicious crowd.

When they reached the outskirts of the city of the mountains, Himavan came out with a large retinue to meet them. He was enchanted to see the divine form of Shiva, totally unlike what he had been expecting. The Lord looked wonderful in his form as Sundaramurti, the handsome one. He was smilingly seated on the bull, bedecked with ornaments and clad in delicate silk garments. His smile illuminated the entire place with its charm. Himavan was delighted and welcomed the divine entourage with all devotion.

Mena, curious to see the person for whose sake her daughter had done so much penance, watched from the balcony as the bridegroom party entered. Shiva knew of her pride and, in his usual fashion, decided to play a joke on her; his *lilas* were always directed at reducing the pride of his devotees. He requested Vishnu and the others to go ahead and promised to follow. Mena was delighted to see the splendid procession. First came the *gandharvas,* the celestial musicians who were noted for their sartorial elegance. Heavenly nymphs waving banners of

brilliant hues accompanied them. Mena thought one of the *gandharvas* must be Shiva and exclaimed in delight, but she was told they were only his attendants. Then came the *yakshas,* custodians of all treasures, and again Mena thought that their chief must be Shiva. Again she was told that these were only his attendants.

"How handsome he must be if his attendants are so fantastic," she thought. Then came Agni, god of fire, shining like molten gold; and Yama, god of death, of matchless splendor, and each time Mena was disappointed to hear that this was not Shiva. When Vishnu came, Mena almost fainted, so handsome was he. She was sure that this must indeed be Shiva, the bridegroom most suited to her lovely daughter, but again she was disappointed.

Next came Shiva accompanied by the *ganas.* "Here comes the bridegroom whom your daughter wanted," someone whispered in her ear. Mena stared aghast at the motley crew that now appeared. The *bhutas, pretas,* and *pishachas* came first—the spirits, ghosts, and ghouls. Some were making hissing sounds in the form of violent gusts of wind, some had crooked faces and deformed bodies, some were lame and others blind, some hobbled on one leg, and others carried staffs and tridents in their hands. Some had no faces, while others had deformed and distorted visages. Some had no eyes, and some had many eyes. Mena was terrified when she saw these mutilated and horrible creatures who were supposed to be escorting the bridegroom. She was sure there must have been some mistake and begged someone to point out Shiva to her.

"There is Shiva! There is the bridegroom!" came the shout.

On seeing him Mena trembled and nearly fainted. "Is this the person my dear daughter did *tapasya* for?" she wondered.

He had five faces and three eyes. His hair was matted and had the crescent moon on it. His body was smeared with ashes. He had ten hands with a skull in one, the trident and sword and many other gory weapons in the others. His upper cloth was a tiger's hide, and the lower one, an elephant's. He was utterly disheveled and untidy, with odd eyes and wild look as if he were inebriated. The entire bridegroom party

appeared to be intoxicated and was rolling about in a drunken orgy. Now and again they shouted, "Glory to Shiva! Glory to Shiva!" and flung skulls and bones and reptiles into the air instead of flowers.

"This is the bridegroom," whispered a voice behind her. Mena gave one look and fainted. As soon as she recovered she wept and wailed and swore that she would certainly not give her daughter to such a creature.

"What shall I do? Where shall I go?" she wailed. "My family is shamed. My life doomed. Where are those sages who call themselves celestial? I shall pluck out their beards with my own hands. They are the ones who cheated us." Turning to her daughter, she cried out, "Is this the fruit of your penance? Surely your intellect has been deranged. You have cast away sandalwood paste and smeared yourself with mud. Setting aside cooked rice you are bent on eating the husk! O what have I done to deserve such a fate?" So saying the poor lady wept uncontrollably and bewailed her lot.

Narada and the sages tried to reason with her, but she would not listen. At last her husband came and told her that this was all a sport of Shiva and he was only trying to test her. Parvati was desperate at seeing the condition of her mother and said softly to her, "O mother! Why has this delusion overtaken you? Please give me to Lord Shiva. I have wooed him, mentally, verbally, and physically. I will never marry another."

Brahma came and spoke to Mena, "Lord Shiva has many forms and names. He delights in indulging in different sports. He is the master of illusion. Knowing this you shouldn't hesitate to give your daughter to him."

Still Mena refused, and so Vishnu himself came and said to her, "You are the beloved daughter of the *manes,* yet I'm afraid you have no conception of the greatness of Shiva. He has done this only to test you. He is possessed of all attributes, yet devoid of them. He is both form and formlessness. He is hideous as well as handsome. No one can describe his real form. It is only because of your daughter's great penance that he has agreed to become your son-in-law. Consider yourself

to be most fortunate that he has blessed you in this fashion. Hence, O wife of Himavan, stop your tears and accept him as your son-in-law. All will be well."

Hearing these pleasing words of Lord Vishnu, Mena relented a little and said, "I will give my daughter to him only if he assumes a pleasing aspect. Otherwise whatever any of you might say, I will not consent to this marriage. This is my firm resolve." So saying she averted her face and kept a strict silence.

Vishnu went and gave the news to Shiva while Parvati prayed to Shiva with all her heart and begged him to come in a form that would delight her mother. Shiva laughingly agreed, and as the palace doors were flung open, he strode in, and to Mena's surprise, his form was wondrous to behold.

Every part of his body was exquisite. He was fair and handsome and shone with a divine radiance. His dark, lustrous eyes turned toward Mena and penetrated to the depths of her soul. She thought he was the personification of masculine beauty. His dark, silky hair flowed to his broad shoulders. His long, lithe limbs were clad in silk. His neck was adorned with many ornaments, and he was wearing a garland of fragrant jasmine flowers. In fact he was Sundaramurti himself, the most handsome man she had ever seen. There was a glimmer of a smile on Shiva's face when he saw Mena's discomfiture.

The eight *siddhis* (supernormal powers) danced in front of him, showering the path with rose petals. The rivers Ganga and Yamuna walked on either side, fanning him with yak tail fans. Vishnu, Brahma, and the other gods followed him.

Mena went forward with Himavan to welcome him and said, "O great Lord, my daughter is indeed blessed. It is only by virtue of her penance that you have now come to our threshold." Thus saying, Mena worshipped him with sandalwood paste and whole rice grains mixed with turmeric. Other married women came with ghee lamps and camphor lights and waved these auspicious flames before him. The *gandharvas* sang exquisite songs while the *apsaras* danced in gay abandon.

After this the wives of the sages ceremoniously escorted Parvati to the temple of their family deity. Her beauty entranced all those present. Her complexion was dark as collyrium; her thick black hair was plaited and covered with flowers and jewels. Necklaces covered her breasts, and bangles and bracelets her hands. Her lips, which had been colored with red lacquer, opened slightly to reveal her lovely teeth that had the sheen of pearls. Sandalwood paste, musk, and saffron had been smeared over her body. Her pink feet tinkled with the sound of anklets as she walked. She carried an exquisite gem-set mirror in one hand and a play lotus in the other. On seeing the fascinating form of the mother of the universe, all the gods bowed. For one split second her eyes met those of Shiva, and she gave a small secret smile as an unspoken message of love between them. Then she went out of the city to worship the family goddess. When she returned she was given another auspicious bath and bedecked with ornaments Shiva had brought for her.

In the bridegroom's house similar rites were being performed for Shiva. After having been bathed and anointed, he rode on the bull to the wedding hall. The white umbrella of royalty was held above him, and dancers and singers went ahead. He was followed by the gods and ceremoniously seated on the highly decorated stage reserved for the bridal couple. Then at the auspicious time, Parvati was escorted to the stage and seated on the specially prepared altar. The ceremony began at a time when all the planets were in a favorable position.

Himavan took his daughter's hand in his and repeated these words, "O Lord Shiva, I'm giving this young girl, my daughter, to you as your wife. Be pleased to accept her." With these words he placed Parvati's hand in Shiva's and repeated the *mantra* "Tasmai Rudraya Mahate."

Shiva grasped the lotuslike hand of Parvati in his own and repeated the appropriate *mantras*. At the request of the officiating priest, Shiva applied the auspicious red powder to Parvati's forehead. Grasping her trembling hand in his, he took her thrice round the sacred fire to plight their troth. Thus, with the chanting of the pertinent Vedic *mantras,* Lord Shiva as Sundaramurti wed the divine goddess Parvati. Afterward

they were seated on the same decorated seat while all the guests came and worshipped the cosmic couple, who were really two halves of a whole.

After the ceremony was completed there were great celebrations and rejoicing in the land. The final rite was when the bridegroom was led to the beautifully decorated bridal chamber. Parvati was brought by the sixteen celestial mothers and handed over to him. Thinking this to be the appropriate time, Rati, wife of Kama, came near them and begged Shiva to resuscitate her husband. Shiva smilingly agreed, and much to Rati's delight, Kama appeared before them in his previous form.

As was the custom, after staying four days in the bride's house, the marriage party set out for the bridegroom's abode. Mena wept and begged Shiva to take great care of her beloved daughter. The celestial mothers advised Parvati about the duties of a chaste wife. Parvati bowed to her parents and shed a few tears at the thought of the coming parting. Accompanied by the gods and his *ganas,* Shiva returned to Kailasa with Parvati. After ceremoniously leaving the couple there, the gods returned to their own abodes.

Aum Namashivaya!

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Aum Shivaapriyaya Namaha!

13

The Cosmic Couple

I saw Him, I saw Him,
The heart's desire of the beautiful Uma.
He enslaved me, He enslaved me,
I adorned my head with the feet of the Lord.

SAINT SUNDARAR

Parvati was transported from the comfortable palace of her parents to the chilly caves of the Himalayas. Henceforth these caves would serve as her boudoir. She had no regrets; she had chosen her path, and in her eyes everything was perfect. The faultless, brilliant peak of Kailasa was the place chosen by Shiva for his new abode. Close by was the scintillating lake called Manasarovar, or lake of the mind, where celestial damsels sported with their lovers. In these icy waters Parvati would bathe. She was enthralled by the austere beauty of her new residence. The lack of comforts did not put her off in the least. She was prepared for it. With her beauty and wit she conquered the heart of this great yogi, this strange ascetic whom she had married. She sported with him on the mountain peaks and slopes of the Himalayas and bathed in the cold waters of the lake amidst the lotuses and the royal swans. She was as gentle and graceful as he was wild and forceful. Her soft

and slow *lasya,* or woman's movements, and his forceful and masculine *thandava,* or cosmic dance, together enraptured the entire universe. Her beauty inspired him to create all forms of art, song, and dance. He became master of all *kalas,* or art forms.

They danced and made love to the vibrations of the universe. Wrapped in his arms she traveled on the bull Nandi across the skies.

When it rained he took her above the clouds and when it was hot, he took her into caves. Thus aeons passed while the cosmic couple sported with each other on the peak of Kailasa and in various other celestial spheres.

As time elapsed two demons were born into the world, brothers named Shumba and Nishumba. As a result of their *tapasya,* Brahma granted them the boon that they requested. They insisted that they should meet with death only at the hands of a woman. She should be a virgin, born of a part of Shiva, and she should be so beautiful that they would fall in love with her. Brahma agreed, and the brothers became so bold that they began to harass both gods and humans; they were quite sure that no such woman would be forthcoming. The gods went to Brahma and he in turn went to Shiva and begged him to create a woman who would be a part of him and extremely beautiful. Shiva agreed and bided his time to get Parvati into a rage, so that she would shed her color and become the virgin goddess, Kaali, who alone would have the qualifications to kill the demons.

Many years passed while the great yogi appeared to be totally tamed by Parvati's exquisite beauty and charm. Her wit and wisdom stimulated him to share with her all the knowledge that he had gained by his intense *tapasya*. Because of her the whole world gained this knowledge, which has come down to us through the Puranas and the Shastras and Tantras. There was no end to her thirst for knowledge and no end to his wisdom. She was the perfect student and he, the perfect teacher, Dakshinamurthy. She asked many questions pertaining to society, nature, life, marriage, the duties of all types of people; about music, dance, palmistry, astrology, occult sciences; about birds, beasts,

and life after death, as well as different methods of freeing oneself from mortal coils. There was no subject she did not touch upon and no question that he could not answer. The wealth of their divine discourses has come down to us in various ways through the minds of the sages who have meditated upon him.

Parvati seduced him in subtle ways, and he realized that one who ran away from life without dealing with and overcoming the dualities would never attain liberation. On the other hand, one who was totally immersed in worldly pleasures without a thought of the supreme truth underlying everything was a fool who would never attain peace of mind, much less liberation. Harmony, or balance between these opposites, was what led to truth—harmony between Purusha and Prakriti, matter and spirit; harmony between the cosmic couple, Shiva and Parvati.

Once they had a dance contest in which she had to imitate all his poses. She could perform as perfectly as he could, but in order to tease her, he took the difficult posture known as *urdhva-thandava*. In this pose he lifted his right leg straight up above his head. She had to declare herself to be the loser for she could not do this. Then she adopted a perfectly beautiful feminine pose in front of him. She was so dark that she looked as if she were a statue made from ebony. Shiva laughed and teased her about her color. This was a good opportunity to enrage her, he thought.

"You are indeed Kaali," he said, "goddess of the night, goddess of death, goddess who removes all the evils of the age of Kali."

Hurt by his words, she decided to change her color. Bidding goodbye to him, she went to the same forest where she had done *tapasya* in order to get him, as her husband. Shiva allowed her to go since he knew that this parting was part of the plan to kill the two demons. In the forest she started rigorous *tapasya*. Once a huge tiger approached her with a view to satisfying its hunger, but as it came near her, its body became numb, and it could not move. It froze in the crouching position in which it had rested before pouncing on her. The tiger stayed in that position, never taking its eyes from her form. After a long time

she opened her eyes and seeing it, felt pity and conferred her grace on it. The tiger repented and realized the nature of the divinity on which it had unknowingly meditated for so long by fixing its gaze on her. The numbness disappeared, and from then on it became her faithful slave and stayed close to her, guarding her from attack by other wild animals.

Seeing her engaged in rigorous penance, Brahma arrived on the scene and praised her. He begged her to take another form and rid the world of the two demons, Shumba and Nishumba, who were terrorizing everybody.

"O Mother! I have granted a boon to these arrogant demons, and only you are capable of vanquishing them. I beg you to destroy them. You alone can do this."

Hearing this, the goddess Parvati cast off her dark skin and became fair in color, thus acquiring the name Gauri, or the radiant one. The dark outer skin took the form of Kaali, the virgin goddess, with the luster of a black rain cloud. She held the conch and discus of Vishnu as well as the trident of Shiva in her various arms, for she had the strength of both. She had three eyes and was moon-crested like Shiva. She had three natures—gentle, terrible, and a mixture of the two. She was a virgin, beautiful and invincible. Parvati told her to go with Brahma in order to slay the demons. Kaali took a huge tawny lion that appeared on the scene as her vehicle. Bowing to her mother, Parvati, she rode on the lion and went to the Vindhya Range of mountains that were to be her abode.

The two demons, Shumba and Nishumba, came to the place where she had taken up residence and were smitten by her beauty. They tried to molest her, but she killed them easily, as had been prophesied by Brahma.

Part of Parvati's dark color is said to have gone into the river Yamuna, or Kalindi as it was later called, when it made its way from the Himalayas to the forest of Vrindavana, where Krishna was to sport with the *gopis* (milkmaids) in an age yet to come, the age of Dwapara.

Gauri returned to Kailasa and delighted her lord once more in her new role as the goddess with the color of molten gold.

Seeing that she was still a bit annoyed at him for having allowed her to go to the forest without protest, he said, "O my beloved one! Do you not know that we can never be parted from each other? It was only for fulfilling the request of the gods that I ridiculed your color. This universe of forms is known only through words. You are the form of the words, and I am the meaning of the words. How can meaning be separate from word? You are the form of knowledge, and I am the object of all knowledge. Who can separate us?" Thus by his gentle teasing and rational talk he won her over until she became her usual happy self. Once again they indulged in all their favorite sports.

Sometimes they played dice in their mountain retreat. In one of their games Shiva wagered his trident and Parvati, her jewels. He lost and then staked his serpent and lost again. Parvati seemed to be on a winning spree, and soon Shiva had lost everything. He pretended to be quite disgruntled and walked off by himself into the forest. Vishnu met him there and promised to help him win if he could entice Parvati to another game.

Parvati agreed since she was sure her luck would hold, but she began to lose steadily, and Shiva was able to win back all that he had previously lost. Parvati was highly suspicious of this sudden change of luck and warned him of the consequences of cheating. In the middle of their heated argument, Vishnu appeared and pacified Parvati by telling her the truth. He admitted that he had entered the dice, thus ensuring that Shiva won. He also reminded them that life was like a game of dice—sometimes we win, sometimes we lose, but both life and dice games are unpredictable. We should not set much store by either gain or loss but should carry on with the game. This bit of salutary advice pacified both Shiva and Parvati. Shiva pronounced a blessing on all those who chose to play dice on that particular day. This day came to be known as Diwali, the festival of lights.

Once, the cosmic pair had an argument about the reality of the

world. Shiva, the perfect renouncer, held the *advaitic* view that the world was only an illusion and nothing existed except Brahman. Parvati advocated the Sankhya view and insisted that Prakriti was equally real. She herself was Prakriti, so nothing could exist without her. To prove her point she chose to leave the icy peaks of the Himalayas and withdraw into her own subtle nature. Naturally her disappearance caused havoc in the world. Everything came to a standstill. The earth became barren, the seasons did not change, and there was no food for anyone. Animals, humans, demons, and gods all starved. They cried to Prakriti to save them from this cruel fate. Even the sages declared that without food nothing was possible, least of all the realization of Brahman. The Divine Mother was unable to resist the pleas of her children and chose to manifest herself in the holy place called Kasi, or Varanasi. There she set up a kitchen to feed her hungry children, and all of them came in different forms and were given plenty by her. Even Shiva, the perfect yogi, came to her in the form of a *bhikshu,* or beggar, and begged for alms. She fed him with her own hands. Thus she came to be known as *Annapurna,* or giver of food.

Many were the *lilas* enacted by the cosmic couple in order to enthrall the world. Once, it is said, Shiva wearied of so much conjugal bliss and retreated into the forest to resume his *tapasya*. Parvati followed, but he took no notice of her. She prayed to Vishnu for help, and he advised her to take on the form of a tribal woman and entice her husband. Thus, she distracted Shiva, and he followed her back to their own cave. Inspired by her beauty, he composed many tunes on his favorite instrument, the *rudra vina*.

Another time when Shiva was teaching her, he found her attention wandering to fish in the lake. "If contemplating fish is more interesting to you than my words, you might as well become a fisherwoman," he said. His words came to pass, and Parvati was born as the daughter of the chief of a fishing village. She was wild and beautiful and could fish and handle boats better than any man. Her father, the chief, was delighted and wondered how best he could find a husband to match his

beautiful daughter, for she was quite unlike the rest of the fisherfolk. From the peak of Kailasa, Shiva watched the progress of his beloved with interest and wondered how he could get her back. One of his *ganas,* Manibhadra, decided to help his master. He took on the form of a shark and began to harass the fisherfolk in the ocean off the coast where Parvati lived. He overturned boats and ate all the unwary fishermen who ventured into the water. The fishermen were dejected and afraid to go fishing because of this terrifying creature. At last the chief declared that his daughter would be given as the bride of anyone who killed the shark. Shiva, disguised as a fisherman, went to the village and easily killed the shark. He then married Parvati and took her back to their Himalayan retreat.

It was Shiva and Parvati who taught the world the secrets of the *kundalini Shakti,* the coiled serpent of spiritual power that lies at the base of the spine. Parvati herself was the energy of the *kundalini,* the primary spiritual energy in all humans that seeks union with Shiva, the pure spirit. It lies coiled at the base of the spine at the bottom of the passage known as the *sushumna* (channel for psychic energy). Shiva, the pure spirit, is stationed at the top of this passage at the energy vortex, or *chakra,* called the *sahasrara,* on the crown of the head. Parvati is Shakti, the manifestation of all energy, and Shiva, the manifestation of pure spirit. She is matter, or Prakriti, and he, consciousness. He is known as Bhava, or eternal being, and she Bhavani, or eternal transformation. They are the opposite and complementary poles of existence. When they join with each other in cosmic union, the individual soul, or *jivatma,* ceases to exist and melts into the *paramatma,* or cosmic soul. Parvati uncoiled herself and rose up through the *sushumna nadi* like a snake that unwinds itself and darts toward its prey. Piercing the six *chakras,* or whirls of spiritual energy situated in the spinal column known as *mooladhara, swadhisthana, manipura, anahata, vishuddhi,* and *ajna,* she rose to join her Lord, the pure cosmic consciousness, in the seventh *chakra,* the *sahasrara,* the thousand-petaled lotus on the crown of the head. These seven *chakras* are the psychic centers for fear,

desire, hunger, anger, communication, and introspection, and one who has pierced all these rises beyond these emotions and becomes the pure consciousness that is Shiva. As Parvati touched each of these *chakras,* they bloomed like lotus flowers with petals of different hues. When she reached the last *chakra* she no longer existed as a separate being. In that state of perfect union there was bliss. There was no duality, only unity—*Shivoham, Shivoham* (I am Shiva). Thus aeons passed while the cosmic couple was submerged in the blissful union of Purusha with Prakriti, which was totally unproductive in terms of progeny. In that state there was neither creation nor destruction; everything was bliss alone. When there is neither lust nor desire, how can offspring be begotten? The gods were troubled. They were anxious for the union of Shiva and Parvati to produce a son who would kill the *asura,* Taraka, and it looked as if the couple had completely forgotten the purpose of their marriage. The gods approached Vishnu and begged him to intercede on their behalf and remind Lord Shiva of his promise.

Aum Namashivaya

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Aum Laladakshaya Namaha!

14

Kartikeya Defeats the Demon

I bow to Subramanya, son of Shiva, general of the gods,
Who has six faces and is adorned with sandalwood paste,
And who rides the peacock as a vehicle.

"Sri Subramanya Pancharatnam"

Creation and destruction are the opposite poles of existence. They are complementary to each other and both are necessary for living a complete life. Duality is the very nature of existence; without having experienced darkness we will never be able to appreciate light. Thus we see that the Puranas are filled with stories of the wars between the gods and the demons, the *devas* and the *asuras*. The *devas* are creatures of light; the *asuras,* of darkness. Their mutually antagonistic roles ensure their eternal enmity. Sometimes the gods are victorious, and at other times, the demons prevail. This seesaw provides the dynamism by which our dualistic cosmos sustains itself. The prayers and sacrifices of human beings sustain the power of the gods and in general manage to maintain the cosmic balance between good and evil. Sometimes, however, when the world is

passing through a particularly negative period, when the evil propensities of human beings tower above the good, then a demon of extraordinary power and wickedness is born. When this happens the gods are forced to take recourse of Vishnu and Shiva to help them. However, even the gods never have direct access to these cosmic beings but can only approach them through the mediation of the Creator, Brahma. The *asura* Taraka was born at such a period in cosmic history, when negativity was at a peak. He was a demon of extraordinary might whom the gods could not defeat by themselves, so they went to Brahma, who approached Vishnu, and that is how the union of Shiva and Parvati came to pass. Now, once again they approached Brahma, who placed their request before Vishnu, and all of them went to Kailasa to ask Shiva to fulfill his promise to beget a son, the only one who could kill Taraka.

The *ganas,* who were stationed outside the cave where Shiva and Parvati were consorting, had orders not to let anyone enter, so they forcibly blocked the gods. Standing outside the entrance, the gods began to praise Shiva.

Shiva and Parvati had been in cosmic bliss for many aeons and were unaware of the passage of time. At last Parvati roused herself from this cosmic embrace and the thought darted into her mind that it would be wonderful to have a child by Shiva. Shiva guessed Parvati's desire and was prepared to fulfill it. But at this precise point in time the gods arrived at their doorstep. When Shiva heard their distressed cries, he controlled himself and went outside. As soon as he heard their request, he discharged the seed that he had been withholding for so many aeons. The fiery seed fell on the earth. The earth could not bear the heat and begged Agni, the god of fire, to help her. Agni took on the form of a dove and swallowed the fiery seed.

In the meantime Parvati was left totally bereft. She came out angrily and cursed the gods, "O you selfish ones! You are only interested in getting your own ends and never think of the unhappiness of others. Thanks to you, I have become barren. I curse all of you that all your wives will also be barren!"

Agni found the heat of the potent seed to be unbearable. He discharged it in the Himalayas amidst snow and ice, in the hope that it would cool, but it continued to scorch the mountain. Himavan, king of the mountain, was unable to bear the fierce heat of the seed and hurled it into the River Ganga. The river transported the seed to its banks and deposited it on a clump of grass. This grass became the womb for the seed of Shiva and nurtured the fetus. On the sixth day, in the bright half of the lunar month called Margashirsha, the son of Shiva was born. The gods played celestial music and rained flowers on the divine child, who was as bright as a flame.

At this time, when the divine child was gurgling and kicking his legs in the clump of grass, the great sage Visvamitra came upon him and was amazed to see his brilliance. The sage understood that the child wanted him to perform the essential purification rites performed on newborns. The sage grasped the message, which was transmitted mentally, and forthwith did all that had to be done. The child blessed him and said that in the future he would be known as a *brahmarishi*. On being asked about his parentage, the child replied, "Know me to be Guha (the mysterious one), and let this be kept a secret." He also came to be known as Sarabhu (born among reeds).

Soon after, Agni came to the spot and recognized the boy to be his son, since he had carried the seed within himself. He presented him with a javelin, or *vel,* which then became Guha's weapon. Thus he was known as Velayudha (the one with the spear). He was also known as Pavakatmaja (son of fire).

Meanwhile six ladies known as the Krittikas, who are really the constellation known as the Pleiades, descended to the earth, saw the boy, and were enchanted by him. All of them wanted to nurse him and started an argument among themselves as to who should suckle him first. Knowing their desire, the child assumed six faces and drank milk from all their breasts. Hence he came to be known as Shanmukha (six-faced). The Krittikas took him to their own abode and fed and fondled him to their heart's content. Since they were his virtual mothers, they

called him Kartikeya. He became their dearest treasure, and they never let him out of their sight, even for a minute.

In the meantime, Parvati went to her Lord and begged him to find out what had happened to his seed that had fallen on the ground, which she knew could never be destroyed. Shiva called the gods and told them to discover what had happened to it and who was concealing it. Agni confessed that he had swallowed it, since the earth could not support its heat, but that he himself had been unable to bear the heat and had deposited it on the mountain, which in turn had thrown it into the Ganga. Even Ganga could not cool the fiery seed and had deposited it on the banks amidst a clump of *saras* reeds. The wind god now took up the tale and told Parvati that the maidens known as the Krittikas had taken the child to their abode, where he was in their custody. They were nurturing him as lovingly as if he were their own son. Hearing this, Shiva sent his *ganas* to the abode of the Krittikas. The emissaries of Shiva surrounded the residence of the Krittikas, who became terrified at the sight of these extraordinary creatures and begged Kartikeya to save them. He told them not to be afraid since he could easily conquer the *ganas*. Before he could confront them, Nandiswara, commander of the *ganas,* stood before him and recounted the whole story of his birth and urged him to return to Kailasa where Shiva and Parvati and the whole concourse of gods were awaiting him. Kartikeya agreed and took leave of his foster mothers, the Krittikas, and went with Nandiswara to Kailasa. A huge entourage was there, ready to welcome him and escort him into the assembly. Eulogizing him, they took the boy, also known as Kumara, to the presence of his divine parents. As he strode into the assembly everyone was astounded to see his amazing presence. He was the color of molten gold and had the brilliance of the sun, with a halo round his head. Both Shiva and Parvati were filled with joy when they saw their son and embraced him with great love. Parvati kept the boy on her lap and gave suck to him and fondled him. Then Kumara sat on Shiva's lap and played with the snakes round his neck.

After a while the gods urged Shiva to crown the boy, so Shiva seated him on a jewel-studded throne, and the sages worshipped him with Vedic chants. Jeweled pots filled with water from all the holy rivers of the land were brought, consecrated by *mantras,* and poured over the boy's head to the accompaniment of Vedic chants. Brahma performed his *upanayanam* ceremony and gave him the holy thread, a water pot, the invincible arrow called the *brahmastra,* and the famous Gayatri *mantra*. He also gave him all knowledge of the Vedas.

Vishnu presented him with a crown and many bracelets, including his own *vanamala* (garland). Shiva gave him a trident, the bow called the *pinaka,* an axe, and the missile called the *pasupata*. Indra, king of the gods, gave Kartikeya his own weapon, the thunderbolt, and a royal elephant. Varuna, king of the waters, gave him the white umbrella of royalty and a necklace of gems. The sun gave him a chariot swift as the mind and a coat of invincible armor. The moon gave a vessel filled with nectar. Kubera gave him a club, and Kama, the weapon of love. His mother, Parvati, blessed him with all power and prosperity. Lakshmi, goddess of wealth, gave him divine wealth, and Savitri, the goddess of *siddhis,* or supernormal powers, gave him the knowledge of these powers. The powerful rooster was given to Kartikeya as his insignia and became the emblem on his flag, and the peacock, his vehicle.

Thus blessed by all the gods, Kartikeya was ready to face the demon. Shiva told the gods to take him as their general and kill the demon Taraka. Thus he is also known as Devasenapati (general of the gods). Seated in a celestial aerial vehicle, Kartikeya led the gods to the region of the *asuras*. Taraka led out the demons, fully armed with all types of weapons. Virabhadra, leader of the *ganas*, rushed at the *asura* and fought a terrific battle with Taraka. At last Virabhadra was defeated, and the *asuras* exulted. Then Indra came forward and fought with Taraka and was defeated. The apparently invincible Taraka defeated all the gods, one by one. When Vishnu set out to fight with him, Brahma advised him not to fight, for only the son of Shiva could kill him; that was the boon that Brahma had given Taraka. The gods

eulogized Kartikeya and begged him to save them from the scourge of this terrible demon. Thereupon ensued a terrific duel between Kartikeya and Taraka. They charged at each other like maddened bulls with their spears raised. As they grappled with one another, the wind held its breath, the sun became dim, and the earth quaked. At last, when the specified time for Taraka's death had come, Kartikeya brandished his spear and struck him hard on the chest. The *asura* fell with a tremendous roar and died before the gaze of all the astounded spectators. The rest of the *asuras* fled in fear, as Shiva and Parvati came to congratulate their beloved son and the whole world rejoiced.

Bana, another demon, had fled from the battle. He now started harassing the mountain Krauncha, who came to Kartikeya for help. Kartikeya killed Bana and delivered the mountain. In order to commemorate the killing of all these *asuras,* Kartikeya installed three *lingas* of Shiva. He then delivered Kumuda, the son of the serpents, from harassment by the *asura* Pralamba. After this, the jubilant gods escorted Kartikeya back to Kailasa, the abode of his father, Shiva. He was received with great delight by his parents and stayed with them for a while on the mountain.

The esoteric meaning of Kartikeya's birth and life are worth investigating. He was born to destroy the demonic forces of the world; therefore he had to come from the seed of Shiva, who personifies the destructive aspect of the trinity. His birth actually is an allegoric representation of the story of creation. In the beginning the light of Brahman filled everything. From there it passed on to become air, fire, water, and earth. This is the etymology of Kartikeya's birth—the descent of the formless Brahman (embodied as Shiva) into the forms of the five great elements (*pancha bhutas*) of nature. He was born from the seed of Shiva that was ejected into etheric space and transported through the air (*vayu*) to Agni (fire), who dropped it into the waters of the River Ganga. She deposited the seed upon her banks in a clump of reeds. Thus the five elements of ether, air, fire, water, and earth combined in order to nurture the seed of Shiva. The two great forces of nature are gravity and electromagnetism. Ganesha

is the force of gravity and Kartikeya the god of electromagnetism. His power is electric. His *vel,* or spear, works deeply within us like the powerful force that binds electrons and neutrons together. This power is said to emanate from his spear like energy particles expanding and filling the universe in the form of sound and light waves. The seed was strengthened by contact with fire and then cooled in the purity of the Ganga. The baby was nurtured by the heavenly constellation called the Krittikas. His six faces represented the six seasons, thus he was master of time. He sucked from the breasts of heavenly damsels and was thereby sustained by the power of their heavenly bodies. His weapon was the spear, with which he routed all demonic forces. His vehicle, the peacock, is noted for its vanity. Kartikeya is eternal youth, most handsome to behold, but his vanity is totally under control, for he rides on it. His insignia is the cock, noted for its virility and arrogance. The man of strength and beauty who has mastered himself has no pride in either of these personality traits and is ever immersed in the bliss of the Supreme. He is wedded to a tribal girl, for he sees all humans as the same. The king of gods rewards him with his own daughter as consort. Heaven itself rewards one who is above the lure of physical beauty and strength and who concentrates only on the supreme truth, which is the source from which all of us have come.

> *The moving and nonmoving universe is but the manifestion of his subtle and unmanifest form. He by whose glance all these manifestations disappear with the realization that nothing exists except the Supreme Brahman: to that Dakshinamurti, the Supreme Being embodied in the benign Guru, I offer my profound salutations.*
>
> "Dakshinamurthy Stotram"
> by Adi Shankara

Aum Namashivaya!

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Aum Sharvaya Namaha!

15

Ganesha, Remover of Obstacles

I bow to the single-tusked Lord Ganesha,
Who has a huge body, shining like gold,
And a large belly and beautiful eyes.

"Ganashtakam"

One day while Parvati was taking a bath, Shiva entered the premises without requesting permission. Parvati felt rather shy and gently rebuked Shiva for having entered without permission. Soon after, her two friends, Jaya and Vijaya, came to her and urged her to keep an attendant who would be totally subservient to her and to no one else. In light of the previous incident, she decided that this was just what she should do. Moreover, she longed to have a child of her own, since Kartikeya was always busy with wars. The next time she went for a bath, she smeared herself with turmeric and saffron powder and then scraped it all off her body into a ball, and she shaped the ball into the form of a little boy and breathed life into it. The child was big and handsome, filled with strength and valor. She named him Vinayaka, "the leader," and gave him clothes and ornaments

and said, "You are my son, and from now on you will also be my bodyguard."

The boy was very happy to hear this and asked his mother to command him. She told him that his first job would be to guard her door while she took her bath or wanted to be alone in her apartments. She also presented him with a staff to ward off intruders. The next day when she went for her bath she stationed the boy outside and told him that no one should be allowed to enter. Soon after, it so happened that Lord Shiva came on the scene and tried to enter. The boy blocked him with his staff. Shiva could not believe that a small boy could be so audacious and asked him sternly, "Who are you, and who gave you permission to stop me from entering my wife's apartments?"

The boy replied, "Sir, my mother is taking her bath, and she has kept me here and asked me to keep out all intruders."

Shiva replied, "Do you not know me? I'm Shiva, and Parvati is my wife. Now let me pass." The boy politely refused and barred the way once again. At first Shiva was quite amused by this and tried to move the staff and enter, but the boy hit him with the stick. This was too much. Shiva controlled his temper and went back to his apartments and told his *ganas* to go and forcibly remove the boy. The boy confronted the *ganas* fearlessly and told them he would not let anyone inside, even Brahma, the Creator himself. They were forced to retreat since they did not feel like killing such a charming boy. The disgruntled *ganas* returned to Shiva and informed him of the proceedings. Shiva told them to return and try all their arts of persuasion, but Vinayaka could not be subdued with words.

Hearing the altercation going on outside the bathroom, Parvati sent her maids to inquire into the matter. They reported that Vinayaka was bravely confronting the whole regiment of *ganas*. She was delighted when she heard this and told them to encourage Vinayaka.

Vinayaka was happy to hear these words of encouragement and

fearlessly told the *ganas,* "You are the *ganas* of Shiva, and I am the *gana* of Parvati so we are equal. My mother has told me that no one should enter this apartment, either forcibly or humbly. So you may all go back."

At this, the *ganas* returned to Shiva and asked for further orders. Shiva was not happy at having to admit defeat at the hands of his wife's single *gana,* so he accompanied his guards back to the spot, and there ensued a terrific skirmish between Vinayaka on one side and Shiva and his *ganas* on the other. Seeing that his *ganas* were all being defeated, Shiva hurled his trident and neatly severed the boy's head from his shoulders.

When Parvati learned of this she was furious and created many Shaktis and ordered them to go and fight with the ganas. The gods now entered the fray and came to help the *ganas.* The battle that ensued was terrible, and at last the gods begged Parvati to forgive them and end it.

She replied, "My son has been killed, and I shall never forgive unless he is revived." The gods relayed this message to Shiva, who told them to go in a northerly direction and chop off the head of the first creature they saw, and affix it to the body of Vinayaka. It so happened that the first creature they encountered was an elephant. They promptly cut off its head and affixed it to the headless body. They chanted *mantras* for the resuscitation of the body and sprinkled holy water on it, and immediately the body rose up with the body of Vinayaka and the head of an elephant.

Parvati was happy to see her son come back to life, even though he had the head of an elephant. It is said that once long ago she had gone to an art gallery of the gods. When she came to the glorious figure of ॐ, she was entranced and stood spellbound in front of the *mantra.* It was at that moment that the figure of Vinayaka came to her mind, and she, being the Mother Goddess, brought the figure into being. Thus Vinayaka's figure is a dynamic, anthropomorphic representation of the *mantra* of ॐ, the symbol of Brahman. She was delighted to see how closely her conception aligned with his form.

She kissed Vinayaka and blessed him and told the gods that he would in future be the remover of all obstacles in worldly life and spiritual undertakings, and thus should be worshipped first, before the commencement of any other worship. Shiva and the others agreed, and thus it is that to this day Vinayaka must be worshipped before the commencement of any ritual. Parvati also insisted that he should become the Lord of the *ganas,* and thus he came to be known as Ganesha, or Ganapathy. Since he was born on the fourth day of the dark half of the month of Bhadra (Bhadra is the name of a month which corresponds to August/September), Shiva declared that from then onward that day would be celebrated by all as Ganesha's birthday, and the fourth day of each lunar fortnight would also be known as a special day for him. Shiva, Parvati, and all the other gods showered many other boons upon Ganesha.

Once, as a child, Ganesha was playing with a cat. He pulled its tail and rolled the cat in the mud. The irate animal gave a pained howl and dashed off. Ganesha ran back to his mother and climbed on her lap but found to his dismay that she was quite muddy and had tears in her eyes. Anxiously he asked her the cause of her distress, and she taught him an important lesson about the unity of all life. "You alone are the cause of my distress," she said.

"How can that be? I never did anything to harm you."

"Didn't you pull my tail and roll me in the mud?" she asked. Then Ganesha realized this great truth, that any harm done to any creature was tantamount to harming his mother, who was also the Cosmic Mother.

Before going further into the story of Ganesha, it would be good to explore the meaning of his form and origin. Parvati is Shakti, or the power of Lord Shiva, the Supreme. Ganesha's origin is from the dirt and other materials scraped from her body. As such, he represents the consciousness that evolves from matter and expands to its highest state of spiritual freedom. In the form of Ganesha we find the symbol of the emergence of life from earth and the unfoldment of consciousness

from matter. He represents the initiating spiritual power that underlies everything; hence he must be worshipped first. He is the first letter of the alphabet of the gods. He is also the initiating spiritual power at every stage of evolution. If we look closely at his figure with the curling trunk we can see the figure ॐ. The figure of Ganesha symbolizes the idea of the emergence of life from earth and the unfolding of consciousness from matter. His dual form of animal and human points out that we too can aspire to a supramental level, even though we have evolved from the animal. As Lord of the *ganas,* he controls the subtle, obstructive forces of this universe. Since he is their overlord, he is also Vigneshwara, the Lord who clears all impediments or obstructive forces that act as an obstacle in the way of our spiritual progress. In the human being he is situated in the *mooladhara chakra* at the bottom of the spine, potent with spiritual powers. The kundalini Shakti can only awaken when Ganesha's grace is given.

Ganesha's vehicle is a rat, which is really surprising. Imagine the mighty figure of the elephant seated calmly on a tiny rat! What is the meaning of this? A rat is born of the earth and has its existence in burrows and holes in the earth. Consciousness, according to Indian belief, is ingrained even in grains of sand; it merges into an intelligent state after passing through the rudimentary forms. The rat is a fitting symbol for this. It has a primitive intelligence encased in ignorance and is thus restless, avaricious, and worried.

On the other hand, the elephant is the symbol of strength and wisdom and is said to have a remarkable memory and power of discrimination. The elephant's trunk is a symbol of discriminating wisdom that can separate grain from chaff. Its trunk can pick up a tiny pin lying on the ground as well as lift the heaviest logs in the forest. The elephant's head suggests strength, expansion, and reverence for the mighty powers lying hidden in nature.

The figure of Ganesha on the rat thus suggests that the human being embodies both characteristics: the elephant, calm and composed, a majestic creature with immense potential power; and the rat, a restless

animal, constantly running here and there in its frenetic quest for food. The human being has the power to be calm and majestic with ever-expanding consciousness stretching to the infinite, but he continues to be a rat and rush about in the "rat race" of life, fighting and squabbling over trivialities. These two animals symbolize the two stages of consciousness, the primitive state and the expanded state. The human body is between these two and connects them.

The noose in Ganesha's hand is for controlling the senses that run hither and thither like unbridled horses. In another hand he holds the hook, which is generally used by *mahouts* (elephant keepers) to control animals on the rampage. Our passions can be compared to mad elephants, and the hook alone can subdue them and bring them to order.

The snake around Ganesha's belly suggests the arousal of kundalini energy in the human, the psychic energy that rouses itself when certain techniques of yoga are used. The two tusks represent the pairs of opposites in life, and the broken tusk shows that the man of perfection is not under the sway of these opposites. He holds this tusk in his right hand like a pen, denoting the creative capacity of the man of wisdom. The *modaka,* or round sweet that he holds in another hand, indicates the bliss and real sweetness of life, which the enlightened person alone can savor.

One day the sage Narada came to visit the cosmic couple and see the divine children. He brought a pomegranate and offered it to the children, but since this was a very special fruit, the fruit of cosmic wisdom, it could not be cut. Only one of them could have it. So Shiva told their children, Ganesha and Kartikeya, that the one who could circle the whole universe and return first would get the fruit. Kartikeya immediately set off on his peacock mount, quite sure of getting the fruit. Ganesha's mount was the lowly rat that could never outdistance the peacock, but he was not in the least concerned. He calmly circled his parents and held out his hands for the fruit.

"In what way have you qualified for this fruit?" asked his amused parents.

"Both of you together constitute the entire universe. Why should I go round the material universe?" he inquired.

Shiva and Parvati applauded him for his wisdom and presented the fruit to him. When Kartikeya returned he was shocked to find his brother eating the fruit. He angrily questioned his parents about this and was told the reason for their apparent partiality. Kartikeya was quite angry at this trick that his brother had played on him and declared that he would leave Kailasa and go to meditate elsewhere in order to acquire supreme wisdom. He asked Shiva's permission to go, and in Tamil literature it is said that Shiva gave the answer, *"Palam nee,"* which means, "You yourself are the fruit." This is the great upanishadic statement, *"Tat twam asi,"* or that thou art. Legend has it that Kartikeya left Kailasa and went to the hill in the South known as Palani, where he practiced penance in order to discover this truth.

There is another version of this story that explains Subramanya's departure. In this version, when their two sons had reached marriageable age, Shiva and Parvati wanted to get them married. Now the question arose as to which son should marry first. Shiva declared that the one who went around the world first would have first choice. Kartikeya immediately set off on his peacock, whereas the intelligent Ganesha took his purificatory bath, solemnly circled his parents thrice, and demanded that he should have first preference. When questioned about the propriety of his conduct, he declared that Shiva and Parvati contained within themselves the whole universe of movable and immovable things, hence going around them was tantamount to going around the universe.

Ganesha's marriage was celebrated even before his brother returned. Prajapatti Viswarupa had two daughters, Siddhi and Buddhi, and he requested that Lord Shiva accept them as wives for Ganesha. Thus Kartikeya was quite angry with his parents and departed to the mountain known as Palani, despite his parents' earnest request not to go.

The esoteric meaning of Ganesha's two wives is as follows: Ganesha represents the liberated human, the *sthithaprajna* of the Bhagavad Gita; and such a person is wedded to Buddhi, or the discriminative intellect,

and acquires Siddhi, or superconscious powers. The evolved person will be blessed by having both of these as consorts.

Both the wives of Ganesha had offspring. Buddhi's child was called Kshema, or well-being and prosperity; and Siddhi's child, Labha, or gain—the attainment of a higher state of consciousness. One who has realized the supreme self lacks for nothing, not even material prosperity.

Kartikeya, in the meantime, lived on the hill called Palani, in the southern range of mountains. There he came to be known as Muruga, or the divine youth. While living amongst the tribals, he fell in love with a beautiful tribal girl named Valli and married her. Later Indra, the king of the gods, gave his own daughter, Devayani, to the great hero who had won the war for the gods.

Once when Shiva gave a discourse on yoga, every creature in the world rushed to Kailasa. As a result of this mass exodus, the whole world started to tilt toward the Himalayas. All wisdom and knowledge had gone to the North, and there was nothing to keep the balance of the world. Shiva told Agastya, the wisest of his disciples, to proceed south, carrying with him all the sacred and secular lore that he had taught him. Agastya agreed but begged Shiva to give him something that would remind him of the Himalayas. Shiva gave him two huge mountains to take to the South. The demon Ettumba was designated to carry them. He made a huge bow and tied the hills on either side and carried them across his shoulders. When he reached Palani he put the mountains down and went to the river. When he returned he could not pick them up again. He looked around and found a beautiful young boy sitting on one of the mountains. The demon became very angry and told the boy to get off the mountain so he could carry it to its destination. The boy refused, and Ettumba was furious. Just then Agastya came on the scene and recognized the boy to be none other than Kartikeya. He bowed low before him, and Kartikeya said, "I shall keep these mountains here, for they remind me of my home in the North." Agastya agreed, and thus Kartikeya resides on the hills and Agastya on the plains. The balance of the cosmos was restored.

It is said that Parvati was so unhappy at the separation from her eldest son that she begged Shiva to go south. He agreed, and they came to the famous *jyotirlinga* (one of the twelve shrines of Shiva) at Sri Shaila, called Mallikarjuna. From this place it was easy for them to go and visit their son Kartikeya.

Descriptions of the marriage of the sons of Shiva vary. In North India, Kartikeya is supposed to be the elder son, and in the South, Ganesha. In the North, Kartikeya is supposed to be a celibate because he saw his mother in every woman. In the South, Ganesha is the *nitya-brahmachari,* or eternal celibate, because he never found a woman anywhere to compare with his mother. In the South, Kartikeya, or Muruga, is worshipped everywhere. He is seen as the personification of masculine beauty and virility and is always flanked by his two wives, one from heaven and one from the earth. This again has a lesson, no doubt. In the North the worship of Kartikeya hardly exists any more. Ganesha, however, has a special place in both North and South, and his wives, Siddhi and Buddhi, are considered an essential part of him. The two sons of Parvati, the Cosmic Mother, denote the two aspects of the evolved human being—strength and wisdom.

I bow to Sri Dakshinamurthy, Lord and teacher of the three worlds, Who cuts asunder the painful shackles of birth and death and who is to be meditated upon, As sitting beneath a banyan tree and bestowing His grace of supreme knowledge on the sages.

"Dakshinamurthy Stotram" by Adi Shankara

I am not the prana or the five vital forces, I am not the seven elements of the body nor the five sheaths, I am not the organs of speech, or procreation or excretion, I am the essence of consciousness and bliss—Shivoham! Shivoham!

"Nirvanashtakam" by Adi Shankaracharya

I bow to the pure, effulgent Shiva linga, which eradicates the sorrows of many lifetimes and which is worshipped by Brahma and Vishnu.

"Lingashtakam," ancient hymn to Shiva's *linga*

Aum Namashivaya!

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Aum Tripurantakaya Namaha!

16

The Three Demonic Cities

Prostrations to the great Lord, master of the universe, the great God, the three-eyed one, destroyer of the three cities, extinguisher of the three fires as well as the fire at the time of death, the blue-necked one, conqueror of death, Lord of all, the ever-peaceful one, glorious God of all gods!

"Sri Rudrum," *Yajur Veda*

The three sons of the demon Taraka were named Tarakaksha, Vidyunmali, and Kamalaksha. Furious at their father's death, they decided to propitiate Brahma to receive some boons from him, by which they could annihilate the gods. They did *tapasya* for many years, and at last Brahma appeared and promised to give them the boons they craved. With true asuric mentality, they immediately asked for immortality of the body. Brahma said it was not in his power to grant this, that everything that has a birth has to have a death at some time or other, and advised them to ask for something else. After pondering awhile they came up with another brilliant scheme. Each asked to have a wonderful city of his own that would be impregnable and never be destroyed by anyone. Tarakaksha asked for a golden city that would traverse the

heavenly regions, Kamalaksha asked for a silver one that would move about in the skies, and Vidyunmali opted for a magnetic, steel city that could move about freely on the earth. But in order to comply with Brahma's decree that no one and nothing could be totally indestructible, they agreed that the three cities could be destroyed when they came in line with the other two. This phenomenon would happen only once in a thousand years, at midday, when the constellation Pushya was in ascendance. They also insisted that only a single arrow that could pierce all three cities at the same time could destroy them. This arrow had to be discharged by Shiva alone. Brahma, in his usual weak fashion, agreed to all these conditions, and the divine architect Mayan built three impregnable cities and gave them to the three brothers.

Asuras are egoistic and cruel by nature, so when their strength was enhanced by the acquisition of these miraculous cities, it was only to be expected that the three brothers would start to wreak havoc in their respective regions—the earth, sky, and heavens. At last the frustrated gods went to Brahma and asked him to rescue them as well as the earth and the terrestrial regions from the rampages of these cruel brothers. Brahma, of course, could only *give* these absurd boons; he was quite incapable of undoing them. So they went to Shiva, as usual, and placed their request before him. Shiva told them he would not be instrumental in destroying his devotees, and the cunning demons, who knew that Shiva was the one ordained to kill them, had started the worship of Shiva in all their three cities.

So the gods, with Brahma at their head, went to Vishnu, savior of the world. Vishnu, too, said he was powerless to destroy the devotees of Shiva. Every time the *asuras* committed some crime, they immediately propitiated Shiva through some sacrifices and thus eliminated the effects of their *karma*. In this way they became invincible. The only way to make them weak was to stop them from performing these rites.

Vishnu created an ascetic who went to the three cities and spread heretic lore, totally at variance with the ancient Vedic cult. The sage advised the city dwellers to stop worshipping gods like Shiva who were,

he said, really weak when compared to the *asuras*. He initiated the demons into this dogma and soon all worship of Shiva was forbidden in the cities; the rites of the virtuous came to an end, and evil conduct reigned supreme. In each of the three regions where they dominated, the demons swooped down on their hapless victims and ground them to death. Once again, the gods approached Shiva and told him about the latest developments and begged him to rescue them from their plight. Shiva agreed, but there were many obstacles to killing the demons of the cities. Brahma reminded the gods that the demons could be killed only with a single arrow, which would have to pierce all three cities at the same time. This was quite a difficult task since they were always flying about in different spheres. The gods were sorely perplexed by this dilemma. Vishnu, as usual, came to their aid and told them that the cities would be aligned once in a thousand years, and that time was soon to come.

Shiva agreed to kill them if he was provided with a suitable chariot and arrow. Visvakarma, the divine architect, made a cosmic chariot incorporating all the forces of nature. It was golden in color and brilliant to behold. The right wheel was the sun and the left, the moon. The right wheel had twelve spokes for the twelve months of the year and the left had sixteen, corresponding to the sixteen digits of the moon. The six seasons were the rims of the wheels. Time itself was its velocity. All the great *mantras* hung as bells on the spokes. Lord Brahma was the charioteer, and the gods, with Indra at their head, held the bridle. Vishnu penetrated the arrow, and Agni, the spearhead. The Vedas were the four horses. Shiva, or Sharva, was the cosmic archer.

As he got into the chariot, the earth quaked and the mountains trembled. All the gods sang his praises. Brahma drove the chariot with the speed of the mind, with the gods following. Shiva chased the three cities from sphere to sphere, but they did not come into a single line. Then came a celestial voice that told him to worship Ganesha if he wanted victory. Shiva duly recalled his own son Ganesha and requested him to remove all impediments from his path. As soon as he did this,

the three cities came into alignment. A thousand years had passed, and the time specified by Brahma had come. Shiva stood up in the chariot, fixed the arrow on his bow, and drew the string taut. At the auspicious moment called *abhijit,* he discharged the arrow, which flew with a tremendous hissing sound. Since Vishnu himself was in the arrow, and Agni was its steelhead, the arrow blazed forth like a meteor and burned the cities where the demons were lurking. Thus Shiva got the name Tripurantaka, slayer of the three cities. The gods extolled him, but Shiva's face was stern. Taking the ashes from the charred remains of the flying cities, he drew three horizontal lines across his forehead and proclaimed, "Mark my words! One day, the whole world will become as corrupt as these three cities. On that day I shall wield my bow once again and destroy the whole cosmos. Let these ashes on my forehead remind everyone of death, the Destroyer. In the future, all my devotees shall have this mark on their foreheads."

The story of the Tripuras is the story of human redemption from the demonic to the divine life. Shiva is the divine archer, or Supreme Spirit, residing within this fortress. The three cities represent the three sheaths—the body, mind, and intellect. They also illustrate the three *gunas,* or modes of nature—*sattva, rajas,* and *tamas*. The golden city stands for *sattva,* the silver for *rajas,* and the iron for *tamas*. They have to come to a state of equilibrium in a straight formation before the divine archer can shoot the arrow of knowledge and kill all three and thus give redemption to the *jivatma,* or embodied soul. When the time is ripe for such liberation, all the gods or cosmic forces will come to our aid and the human soul, imprisoned within the fortress of the body, will be liberated.

Once Shiva and Parvati went to the Mandara mountains and sported among the peaks. Parvati playfully closed Shiva's eyes with her lotus-like palms. As soon as she did this, a deep darkness spread over the whole universe. Since his eyes had the scorching heat of fire, her hands

started to perspire. Beads of sweat dripped to the ground. Out of this heat and sweat there appeared an inhuman and terrible being, black, deformed, and blind. It had matted locks of hair all over its body. It howled, danced, and flicked its tongue here and there like a serpent and roared like a lion. Parvati removed her hands from Shiva's eyes and light came to the world once again. She was terrified at the sight of this strange creature and asked her Lord what it might be.

Shiva replied, "When you closed my eyes, O beloved, your sweat flowed to the ground and combined with the heat of my eyes and produced this creature. So you are the cause of this creature. He shall be called Andhaka, or the blind one, and you shall care for him like your own son."

Parvati agreed, and the boy was brought up by the *ganas*. At this time the *asura* Hiranyaksha was doing *tapasya* to Shiva in order to get a son. At the end of his *tapasya* Shiva appeared before him and Hiranyaksha asked him for the boon of a son. Shiva was pleased with his austerities but told him he was not fated to have a son; however he, Shiva, would present Andhaka to him as his son. The *asura* was delighted and returned to his kingdom with Andhaka in tow.

At a later time, Lord Vishnu killed Hiranyaksha and his brother Hiranyakashipu. Although Prahlada was the son of an *asura,* Hiranyakashipu, he was a great devotee of Lord Vishnu and became the king of the netherworld after the death of his father. Hiranyaksha had been the elder brother, but his son, Andhaka, was blind and thus could not become king. Andhaka was teased by his cousins for his inefficiency and inability to rule his father's kingdom. Unable to bear these taunts, Andhaka set out to the forest and started doing severe penance, swearing to cut off parts of his flesh and sacrifice the pieces into the fire if Brahma did not appear. At last Brahma appeared and asked him to choose a boon.

Andhaka immediately asked for immortality and invincibility in warfare. Of course, Brahma was powerless to grant him immortality and could only give him a choice as to the method of death. Andhaka

thought for a minute and came up with a brilliant idea. He agreed that death could befall him if ever he coveted a woman like his mother, who was the fairest in the whole world. Brahma agreed and touched his emaciated body, which immediately became strong and handsome. He also gained his sight. Andhaka was delighted. He roamed about from the heavens to the netherworlds, conquering every region, and made Indra and the gods subservient to his will. Proud of his prowess, he slighted the Vedas, the gods, and the Brahmins. He indulged in sexual sport with diverse, beautiful women. Once, as luck would have it, he decided to spend some time in the Himalayas on the Mandara peak. His ministers came and told him of a wonderful sight they had seen.

"O Lord of demons," they said, "living in a cave not far from here we saw a sage in deep meditation. His matted hair was topped with the crescent moon and he wore an elephant hide round his hips. Serpents were twined round his body and a necklace of skulls adorned his neck. He was smeared with ashes. But what is of interest to you is the fact that the most divinely ravishing lady was seated close to him. What is the use of your having gained eyesight, if you are unable to feast your eyes on her? However, we should warn you that two creatures guard their cave. One is an old bull and another, a creature with simian features."

On hearing this, the demon was thrilled and ordered his emissaries to go and ask the sage to give his wife to him peacefully or else be prepared to fight. The yogi was none other than Shiva, and the emissaries of the demon went and told him that it was not befitting for a yogi to keep a young woman by his side. They ordered him to relinquish her immediately and hand her over to the king of the *asuras*.

Shiva smilingly told them to go back to their master and tell him to mind his own business. Shiva then announced to Parvati that he was going to an impenetrable forest in order to perform severe penance. While performing this, he would have to be celibate, and so it would be better if Parvati did not accompany him. Leaving his *ganas* to guard her, the Lord left for the dense forest. Precisely at this time Andhaka

came with his army and fought a fierce battle with the *ganas* who were stationed at the door of the cave. When Parvati saw that the battle was going against them, she prayed to Vishnu to come to her rescue. Vishnu took numerous forms of thousands of ravishing women who immediately surrounded Parvati, so that Andhaka was unable to distinguish which was Parvati. He didn't know what to do and beat a hasty retreat. Soon after this Shiva returned and once again a fierce battle ensued between the *ganas* and *asuras*. At last Shiva decided that the hour for Andhaka's redemption had come, for he had coveted his own mother, Parvati, who was the fairest in the whole world. Shiva impaled Andhaka on his trident and hoisted him in the air. Shiva's trident is known for its cleansing qualities, and as soon as Andhaka was impaled on it, he came to his senses. All the evil was wiped out of him, and he begged Shiva and Parvati to forgive him. Shiva was never one to bear a grudge, so he readily forgave him and asked him to choose a boon. Andhaka begged Shiva to make him his constant companion. Shiva agreed and made him chief of the *ganas*. The *ganas,* as we have seen, were a motley crew of the forlorn, the ugly, and the unwanted, so Andhaka was a fitting candidate for this post.

Aum Namashivaya!

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Aum Shoolapanaye Namaha!

17

Downfall of the Demons

O Lord with matted locks on which is kept the Ganga,
O Lord of ghouls, and death to Death!
O destroying fire of Cupid.
O Lord with throat filled with poison,
O Lord of the elements,
Be gracious unto me.

SAINT SUNDARAR

Once Indra and the other gods, accompanied by Brihaspati, preceptor of the gods, went to Kailasa to see Lord Shiva. The latter wanted to test them and assumed the form of a huge *yaksha* (treasure guardian) and lay in their way. When the giant refused to move, Indra, with the arrogance born of power, raised his weapon, the thunderbolt, in order to kill him. The *yaksha,* who was none other than Shiva, wanted to humble their pride. He held up a blade of grass in his hands and asked the gods if any of them could dislodge the grass from his hands. The gods were quite scornful of this childish request, and each of them thought it would be a simple matter to crush the grass. One by one they tried to dislodge it. The wind god, Vayu, tried first, but blow as he might he was unable to make the blade of grass sway in the gust. Next,

Agni, god of fire, tried his best to burn the little blade with his flame, but it remained unscorched. At last Indra hurled his thunderbolt at the blade of grass, but neither the *yaksha* nor the grass seemed in the least affected.

The gods were perplexed and asked the *yaksha,* "What is the meaning of this? Who are you?"

The *yaksha* replied, "Have you forgotten that there is another power above you? Without the support of that power, none of you can do anything."

Indra was enraged and raised his *vajra* once more and hurled it at the *yaksha*. Shiva opened his third eye. The fierce flame that shot out of his eye would have reduced Indra to cinders had not Brihaspati intervened and begged Shiva to forgive Indra. Shiva forgave him, but the fire that had emanated from his third eye would have scorched the world had it dropped on the earth, so Shiva cast it into the sea at the confluence of the Ganga and the ocean. Here the flame took on the form of a handsome demon boy. Hearing the fierce howls of the child, all the three worlds quaked in fear. The gods ran to Brahma and told him to do something about this strange creature. Brahma went to the ocean and took the boy in his lap. Immediately the demon put his arms round Brahma's neck and tried to throttle him, till tears started to come out of the Creator's eyes. He had hard work to extricate himself from the demon boy's strangling embrace. The ocean, which appeared to have a parental interest in the boy, now asked Brahma to perform the postnatal rites for the child and give him a name and foretell his destiny.

Brahma, whose eyes were full of tears caused by the demon's stranglehold, replied, "Since he was able to make my eyes water, he will be known as Jalandara. This name is doubly appropriate since he took birth in the water. He will be invincible, heroic, and majestic like the ocean itself, and he will become the emperor of the demons. No one except Shiva will be able to slay him. He will have a wife who will be exquisitely beautiful and noble in all ways."

The ocean was very pleased and took the boy to his own abode

and nurtured him with great affection. He grew up into a handsome and splendid youth. The ocean requested the *asura,* Kalanemi, to give his daughter Vrinda to the young man in marriage.

Jalandara became king and ruled over the demons for many years. Once he decided to conquer the gods and sent Indra an order to submit to him or else be prepared to fight. Indra decided to fight but was routed by Jalandara. As usual, Indra rushed to Brahma for aid, but the latter told him to go to Vishnu and seek his help. The gods approached Vishnu, but Vishnu said that Jalandara was his brother-in-law and so he could not kill him. Vishnu's consort, the goddess Lakshmi, was born of the ocean just as Jalandara was, and Jalandara claimed that Lakshmi was his sister and Vishnu, his brother-in-law. Thus Jalandara had got a boon from Vishnu that he would not kill him. The gods now requested the celestial sage, Narada, to go to Jalandara and try to persuade him to infuriate Shiva; otherwise the great Lord would not agree to kill him.

Narada immediately proceeded to Jalandara's abode, stringing his lute. He lauded him and congratulated him on his great good fortune in having subdued all three worlds. Narada continued, "I see that there is no one to equal you in all these worlds, but I have just come from Kailasa, the abode of Lord Shiva, and I have to confess that Lord Shiva's wife is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. I know you to be a connoisseur of feminine charms, and I am sure you will want to possess her."

Hearing this, Jalandara was terribly excited. If there was one thing that all demons had in common, it was their lust for beautiful women, and invariably, unbridled passion was what brought them to ruin.

Jalandara was no exception to this even though his own wife, Vrinda, was a paragon of all virtues. He sent his emissary to Shiva and demanded that he surrender his wife willingly to him or face the consequences of his wrath. Shiva was amused at his audacity and sent the emissary away with a stiff reprimand to his master. When Jalandara heard this he sent his army to fight with Shiva.

Taking this opportunity, Jalandara took on the form of Shiva and

entered Parvati's private apartments, where she was seated with her attendants. Seeing her Lord enter, she came forward. When he looked at her divine beauty, Jalandara could not control himself, and his disguise fell from him. Parvati immediately transported herself to the banks of the lake Manasarovar and prayed to Vishnu to come to her aid. The gentle Lord came to her and asked her what she wanted of him. She recounted the tale of how the *asura* Jalandara had tried to flout her modesty and capture her. She begged Vishnu to do the same to Jalandara's wife, Vrinda. Vishnu promised to help her and went to the forest near Vrinda's palace in the guise of an ascetic. While Vrinda was walking in the park, she was frightened by the sudden appearance of two fierce-looking monkeys. The ascetic, who was none other than Vishnu, saved her. Later the ascetic assumed the form of her husband Jalandara, just as Jalandara had assumed the form of Shiva in order to confuse Parvati. He went near Vrinda and put his arms round her. When Vrinda realized that this was not her husband but Lord Vishnu, she cursed him that one day his wife would be abducted by a *rakshasa* in the guise of an ascetic, and he would have to roam about the forest searching for her. Monkeys and bears would be his only helpers. The Lord laughed and accepted the curse for he knew that all this was bound to happen in his *avatara* as Rama. Vrinda then immolated herself in the fire. Her spirit rose up in a flame and joined the aura around Parvati. All the gods rained flowers round her and applauded her for her great chastity and purity.

In the meantime, unable to see Parvati, Jalandara returned to the battlefield and challenged Shiva to battle. Shiva started to churn the ocean with his big toe. As he rotated his toe, a huge wheel came out of the waters. This was the famous Sudarshana Chakra, which he later presented to Vishnu.

Shiva now told the demon, "O Jalandara, if you wish to fight with me you will have to lift this wheel with your toe. Only then will you be deemed competent to fight with me."

Jalandara laughed in scorn and insulted Shiva and boasted of his own

prowess. But try as he might, Jalandara was unable to lift the wheel. Shiva's eyes emitted sparks of red and blue flame, and taking up the wheel, he whirled it in the air and cut off the head of the arrogant monster. The splendor that came out of Jalandara's body merged with the splendor around Shiva, just as Vrinda's spirit had merged in Parvati's aura. The entire universe now returned to its former state of normalcy, and the gods and other celestial beings returned to their own abodes fearlessly.

Another similar story about Shiva concerns the demon Shankachuda. An *asura* called Dambha had no sons. He went to his preceptor, Shukra, and asked his advice. Shukra gave him the great *mantra* of Lord Krishna and told him to repeat it and perform austerities at the lake called Pushkar. Lord Vishnu was pleased with his devotion and appeared before him and asked him to choose a boon. Dambha asked for a son. Soon after, his wife conceived, and a baby was born to them. In his previous birth this soul had been a close comrade of Lord Krishna and had been called Sudama. He had been cursed by Radha and was now forced to take birth as a demon. His name was Shankachuda, and when he came of age he followed his father's example and went to the lake Pushkar and performed severe *tapasya* in order to propitiate Brahma. The Creator appeared before him and asked him to choose a boon. Shankachuda said that he wanted to be invincible and able to defeat the gods. Brahma agreed and presented him with the divine amulet of Sri Krishna to wear on his arm. He advised him to go to the holy spot called Badrikashrama in the Himalayas, where he would meet a lady called Tulasi, who would be the perfect match for him. Shankachuda followed his advice and married Tulasi. Shankachuda now became chief of the *asuras*. With the blessings of his *guru,* Shukra, he defeated the gods and took over the heavens and all the three worlds and became a great emperor. Everyone was happy for he was a wonderful ruler. Only the gods were unhappy, for they had been ousted from heaven. They went with their complaints to Brahma, who went with them and requested Lord Vishnu to help them.

Vishnu spoke to them: "Listen, O gods!" he said. "This Shankachuda was a great devotee of mine in my *avatara* as Sri Krishna. He was called Sudama and was a great friend of Sri Krishna. He was cursed by Radha and has now taken the form of an *asura*. Krishna has ordained that he will be killed by Shiva's trident, so you should approach Shiva and request his help."

The gods went to Kailasa and asked Shiva to help them. The Lord agreed and sent his emissaries to Shankachuda and ordered him to give heaven back to the gods. Shankachuda refused to do so and told them they would have to fight for it. Thus war was declared and Shiva's *ganas* marched to Shankachuda's kingdom.

At this point Shankachuda started to remember his previous birth and knew that the appropriate time for his release had come. He installed his son on the throne and parted lovingly from his beloved wife, Tulasi, before proceeding to the battlefield. A mighty battle ensued between the opposing armies, in which Shankachuda showed himself to be invincible. At last Lord Vishnu approached Shiva and told him the secret of Shankachuda's invincibility—he had been given impenetrable armor. Moreover he had a spotlessly pure wife who was constantly praying for his safety, and as long as she did so, he would not die.

Shiva requested Vishnu to delude Shankachuda with his *maya*. Vishnu forthwith took on the disguise of an old beggar and went to Shankachuda, asking that he give him his armor. Shankachuda could never refuse a mendicant and immediately ripped off his armor and gave it to him. Wearing this armor, Vishnu approached Shankachuda's wife, Tulasi, and made love to her, pretending to be her husband. Immediately, Shankachuda was bereft of all his powers and could easily be killed by Shiva's trident. Shankachuda was released from his curse and regained his previous form and returned to Goloka to be with his beloved Sri Krishna. It is said that all conches in the world that are used in the worship of Vishnu are made of Shankachuda's bones. When Tulasi heard of Vishnu's deception, she was totally bereft and decided to give up her own

life. She cursed Vishnu that he would be turned into a rock. At that time Shiva appeared and told her not to worry, for Vishnu had done this only to aid the gods, who were his devotees.

"O gentle lady," he said, "cast off this body of yours and you will be given a most virtuous form. On this earth you will become the holy basil plant known as *tulasi*. You will be beloved by Krishna and Vishnu and worshipped by all. The conch and *tulasi* leaves will be essential parts of the worship of Krishna and Vishnu. Your body will also take on the form of the River Gandaki. Due to your curse, Vishnu will become a rock in this river. Scores of sharp-toothed worms will penetrate and erode this rock, and the pieces will be known as *saligramas* and will be used in the worship of Vishnu. One who keeps a *saligrama,* a conch, and *tulasi* leaves in his house will be loved by Vishnu." With this pronouncement Shiva vanished and Vishnu took Tulasi with him to his abode. She cast off her body, which became the River Ganadaki, and Vishnu became a rock on its banks.

The great sage Atri was the son of Brahma. He was married to the most perfect of all women, Anasuya. Since the couple had no children, they went to the forest and meditated on the great God, whomever he might be, in order to get progeny. After many years of penance, Atri's body emitted a brilliant flame that threatened to consume the whole world. The gods approached Brahma as usual, and he in turn went to Vishnu, and they all went to Shiva's abode. Since Atri had not mentioned the name of any one god in his *tapasya,* all three of them decided to visit him and grant his request. The sage was rather surprised to see all of them and politely asked the reason for their visit.

They replied, "You have meditated on the great God, and since we are all equally great, we decided to grant you three sons, each of whom will have a part of our glory." Thus saying, they returned to their own abodes. Very soon Anasuya conceived. The child who was a part of Brahma became the moon, Chandra. The part of Vishnu born as their

son was famous in the world as Dattatreya; he taught the world the greatness of the path of renunciation. The part of Shiva born as their son was known as Durvasa, and he became a great sage, famous for going around the world testing people. It is true that he was known for his bad temper, but one will notice that every time he lost his temper it was for some good reason, and the person he cursed gained something from it. For example, the sage king Ambarisha became famous for his piety due to Durvasa's temper. At the end of Sri Rama's life on earth, Durvasa tested even Rama in order to show the world how the king was prepared to renounce his beloved brother in order to keep his word.

There is another interesting story concerning Atri's wife Anasuya, who was, as we have seen, a model of chastity. One time Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva decided to test her chastity. They took the form of mendicants and went to her hermitage to beg for alms. She came out to give them some food, but they said very politely that they had taken a vow that they would be served only by a naked woman. Anasuya was in a dilemma. It was considered most improper to refuse to give food to a holy man; moreover they looked noble and would perhaps curse her if she refused. On the other hand it would be totally against the vows of chastity for her to go naked in the presence of three men. She thought for a while. Then, by the power of her great chastity, she turned the three gods into three small babies and took them inside the house. She then took off her clothes and calmly proceeded to feed them.

Thus they were forced to remain in her *ashrama* for a long time. In the meantime, Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Parvati, who were the consorts of the three gods, became rather worried at the prolonged disappearance of their husbands. At last they discovered that they were in Atri's *ashrama*. When they went to the hermitage they found three babies playing with Anasuya. When questioned, she admitted that the three were not real babies but wandering mendicants who had come for food. The three goddesses shamefully confessed that the mendicants were none other than their husbands. With her yogic powers, Anasuya returned the mendicants to their original forms. They were very

pleased with the success of their test, blessed Anasuya and Atri, and returned to their respective abodes.

I do not gain any merit by the performance of good, nor do I lose anything by the performance of evil. I have neither happiness nor unhappiness. I gain nothing by chants, pilgrimages, yajnas, or the study of Vedas. I am not the eater, the food, or the act of eating. I am the essence of consciousness and bliss—Shivoham! Shivoham!

"Nirvanashtakam" by Adi Shankaracharya

I have no death, or birth, or caste. I have no father or mother, for I am unborn. I am neither friend nor relation, neither guru nor disciple. I am the essence of consciousness and bliss—Shivoham! Shivoham!

"Nirvanashtakam" by Adi Shankaracharya

Aum Namashivaya!

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Aum Neelakandaya Namaha!

18

Churning the Milky Ocean

O Dispenser of mercy,
Who consumed the strong poison
So that the dwellers of heaven might regain their youth,
Have mercy on me and restore my eyesight.

Saint Sundarar

Once it happened that Indra, king of the gods, was cursed by the sage Durvasa. The sage had received a divine garland from Vaikunta and presented it to Indra. Not realizing the profound value of this gift, Indra threw the garland carelessly over his elephant's head. The elephant shook its head, and the garland fell to the ground and was trampled in the mud. When Durvasa saw this he was furious and cursed Indra that he, along with his retinue of gods, would become old and decrepit. Immediately all the gods lost their youth and supernormal powers. As usual, they ran to the Creator, Brahma, and requested him to intervene with Lord Vishnu on their behalf. They went en masse to Vaikunta and begged Lord Vishnu to help them.

The Lord appeared in all his glory and spoke to them. "O gods," he said, "time is the master controller of all things. At the moment, time is favorable to the *asuras* who are your arch enemies. The wheel of time turns slowly, but one day it will turn in your favor. That will happen only if you churn the milky ocean and get the elixir of life, the *amrita*. Anyone who drinks it will gain eternal youth, but in your state of decrepitude you will never be able to do this by yourselves; you will have to get help from the *asuras*. In desperate situations there is no harm in taking the help of even your confirmed enemies. After you gain your objective you can return to your original state of enmity.

"One who drinks *amrita* will become immortal, so waste no time in doing this. Go immediately to the *asuras* and solicit their assistance. You have no option but to agree to whatever terms they suggest. Many precious objects will come out of the ocean when it is churned. Have no attraction or repulsion to whatever comes. Take only what is given to you, and don't lose your temper if you are prevented from possessing any of them. You may use the Mandara mountain as the churning rod and the serpent Vasuki as the rope. Consign all types of medicinal plants, shrubs, and creepers into the milky ocean in order to curdle it. Only then will it yield the desired benefits." So saying, Vishnu vanished from view.

The gods went and solicited the demons, who agreed to help them provided they were given a fair share of the *amrita*. Imbued with confidence in their abilities, both parties went and lifted the mountain, Mandara, and started to carry it to the ocean. Very soon they could not bear the weight, and the golden mountain came crashing down, killing many gods and demons alike. Lord Vishnu appeared on his eagle vehicle and lifted it up with one hand. Balancing the mountain easily on the eagle's back, he took it to the ocean and placed it in the correct spot. The gods then requested Vasuki, the Lord of snakes, to act as the rope for churning the rod, on the understanding that he, too, would get a fair share of the *amrita*. With great enthusiasm the gods and demons wound the snake round the mountain and started to pull this mighty

churning rod this way and that. Since the gods were too old and weak to do much, Lord Vishnu himself caught hold of the snake's head, and the demons were told to take the tail. The demons were quite mortified at this apparent insult. They refused to touch the tail and declared that it was most demeaning for noble people like them to be forced to catch the posterior of the snake! Lord Vishnu smilingly gave up the head and lifted up the tail with the help of the gods behind him. Thus both sides started to churn the mighty ocean with great vigor. Unfortunately, since the mountain was not supported beneath, it started to sink. A great cry rose up in the ranks of the *devas* and the *asuras*. Lord Vishnu comforted them, took the form of an enormous tortoise, and swam beneath the mountain, lifting it up so that it had a firm base. This was Lord Vishnu's incarnation known as the Kurmavatara. This primeval tortoise of infinite length and strength bore that huge mountain on its back as easily as if it were a mere pebble. It is said that the Lord, as the tortoise, was delighted with the pleasant sensation of scratching on his shellback as the mountain rotated rhythmically over it, while the two teams churned vigorously. Despite their best efforts the work was still proceeding very slowly, so Lord Vishnu took a dual form, that of a *deva* and of an *asura,* and entered both their ranks in order to encourage both sides to greater efforts. He also entered the snake, Vasuki, in the form of a type of anesthesia in order to shield it from the torturous churning that it had to endure. When the vigorous rotating movement seemed to upset the balance of the mountain, the Lord took a gigantic form and stood on top of the mountain to maintain the balance, pressing down each side when needed. Thus, the Lord took on various manifestations in order to strengthen the resolve of all concerned. The fumes and hot breath being emitted by the tired snake were now scorching the *asuras,* who had stupidly opted for the head. The *devas,* too, got their fair share of the fumes, which began to spread everywhere. Then the Lord made rain pour down on them, cooling both sides and giving relief to the snake as well.

However, despite their best efforts, no *amrita* appeared, and both

parties began to lose hope. In order to encourage them, the Lord took an enormous form with thousands of hands and stood in the middle of the two parties and started to churn the ocean with five hundred hands on either side. It was a wonderful sight, and both *devas* and *asuras* watched, spellbound. At last things seemed to be moving. Many aquatic creatures began to surface.

By now the poor snake was quite weary of the whole affair and started to throw up the dreaded *halahala* poison, also called Kalakuta. Its fatal and penetrating fumes began to spread everywhere. Crying loudly in terror, the gods, urged by Lord Vishnu and led by Indra, ran to Shiva and begged him to save them from this new horror. If it fell on the ground, the whole universe would be destroyed. Shiva, the ever-merciful one, immediately appeared on the scene with Parvati, caught the lethal poison before it dropped to the ground, and drank it without hesitation.Thus he was known as the savior of the world. He was prepared to sacrifice his own life in order to save the universe. Parvati knew only too well that his powers were immeasurable and that nothing could harm him, yet her love for him made her weak. She exclaimed in horror and caught her husband's throat in order to stop the poison from slipping down. The poison thus stuck in his throat and made it blue in color. Lord Vishnu extolled Shiva as Neelakanda, or the blue-necked one, while the gods and demons joined in praising him.

The ability to sacrifice one's own welfare for the sake of others is the highest form of the worship of the Supreme, and all the *devas* and *asuras* extolled Lord Shiva. It was a common belief that one who consumed poison should not be allowed to sleep during the night, so all of them remained awake through the different watches of the night, singing the praises of Lord Shiva. Even now this night is celebrated as Mahashivaratri, or the great night of Shiva, and all devotees of Shiva keep watch during this night, singing hymns to the all-merciful Lord. The few drops of poison that happened to drop from the Lord's hands turned into snakes, scorpions, and other poisonous plants and creatures.

The next day, the *devas* and *asuras* once more enthusiastically

began to churn the milky ocean. First to appear was the heavenly cow, Kamadhenu. This was presented to the *rishis* for their rituals. Then came the white horse, Ucchaisravas. Though the *devas* eyed it greedily, the Lord urged them to give it to the *asura*, Bali. Next emerged the four-tusked white elephant, Airavata, which was grabbed by Indra. Then came the jewel, Kaustubha, which was given to Lord Vishnu to adorn his neck. Next came the celestial wish-fulfilling tree, known as the Parijata, as well as the celestial nymphs called the *apsaras*. All these were taken by the gods.

Finally the goddess Lakshmi, seated on a shining red lotus, rose out of the ocean. She was the personification of beauty, filled with auspiciousness. Seeing her dazzling appearance, both the *devas* and the *asuras* stopped their work and ran after her and stood gazing at her with great admiration. The gods of all the quarters brought precious articles for her adornment. When she was elaborately adorned as befitting a bride, they begged her to choose a husband from amongst them. Clad in royal raiment, she carried the wedding garland in her tender hands and undulated around the host of august personages crowding the banks of the ocean. But she did not find anyone who appealed to her! According to her all the gods had some defect. At last she spied Lord Vishnu seated nonchalantly on the banks of the ocean, dabbling his feet in the water, totally unconcerned about her. She realized that he alone was the fitting consort for her and shyly went toward him, placing the beautiful garland of lotus flowers round his neck. The Lord graciously accepted her and gave her a most coveted position in his heart, from which position she cast her gracious look on all his devotees and blessed them with all worldly and spiritual goods. Thus it is said that Lakshmi, goddess of wealth, does not go to those who run after her but only to those who run after her husband.

Next came Vaaruni, the deity of intoxication. The *asuras* happily took her into their midst. After more strenuous effort, there suddenly emerged the handsome figure of a man holding the pot of nectar, the divine *amrita,* in his hands. Known as Dhanwantari, he was a partial

avatara of Lord Vishnu and is the father of the science of *ayurveda*. As soon as the *asuras* saw him they realized that this was the immortal drink for which they had been waiting. They greedily decided to appropriate the whole thing for themselves and immediately grabbed the pot and ran off with it. The *devas* were too weak and stunned to respond. After having gone through such backbreaking labor, they were bereft to find that their efforts were in vain and the *asuras,* as expected, had not kept their part of the bargain. They rushed to Lord Vishnu with their tale of woe.

He comforted them and promised to help. "All those who worked for the accomplishment of the task must get their just reward and a share of the nectar, but since the *asuras* have greedily grabbed the whole pot for themselves, they will be punished and will get nothing. This is the eternal law of *dharma,* which cannot be gainsaid." Saying this he vanished from their view and in his stead there appeared a most fascinating woman, lovely beyond description. With undulating movements of her broad hips she glided into the midst of the *asuras,* who were now quarrelling amongst themselves as to who should get the maximum *amrita*. When they saw the beautiful damsel they left the pot of nectar and rushed to her, inquiring as to who she was and why she had come, and begged her to distribute the nectar impartially amongst them and thus put an end to their quarrels.

She said that her name was Mohini, and with a seductive sidelong glance of her lovely eyes she said teasingly, "I'm actually a woman of a very low type, a harlot as you might say. How can you possibly trust me?"

The *asuras* laughed merrily at her pleasantries and swore that they trusted her implicitly. Mohini said, "I shall divide the nectar amongst you only if you promise to abide by my decision, whatever it may be, and not start quarreling afterward."

They agreed happily, and the maiden made them sit facing east on mats of kusa grass. She called the *devas* and asked them to sit on the opposite side, facing the *asuras*. The *asuras* did not dare to murmur a word, since she had already made them swear implicit obedience.

When both parties were ready and sitting meekly in two neat rows, Mohini entered carrying the golden pot of nectar. All eyes were fixed on her as she appeared. They were so fascinated by her looks and flirtatious behavior that they forgot to look at what she was doing. Vishnu did not want to give the nectar of immortality to the *asuras,* who were cruel by nature. To give them immortality would have been fatal. As Mohini passed through the ranks of the *asuras,* all she gave them was loving glances. The nectar she gave only to the *devas*. The demons did not even notice what was going on, for they were mesmerized by her looks and deportment. Each one thought that she had fallen in love with him. At last, when the whole of the nectar had been consumed, Mohini reassumed her original form, to the consternation of the *asuras* who realized they had been neatly tricked.

Immediately they started to attack the *devas*. The latter had by now gobbled up the nectar and regained their lost youth, and they fought back with redoubled vigor and eventually defeated the *asuras,* who returned home to lick their wounds and plot further ways to defeat their arch enemies.

This story, as most of the stories of the Puranas, has an esoteric meaning. The milky ocean is the mind. The gods and demons are the negative and positive thoughts in the mind, which churn it so forcefully. The Mandara mountain is the load of nescience that we carry from birth to birth. The rope of the snake is our pride. When we try to subdue this mind by some form of *sadhana,* or spiritual practice, such as meditation, the first thing to emerge is the accumulated poison of passions—lust, greed, anger, fear, and so on—that can be removed only by the Lord himself. Only then will the ambrosia of wisdom arise. Even at this point, great care must be taken to keep the ego in check, or else this wisdom will be snatched from our mouth by our negative emotions. Our asuric ego will grab this opportunity to declare itself to be supreme. Once again it is only the Lord who can save us. Sincere prayer and effort can help us to regain this lost wisdom, and only then can we become liberated beings.

It has another esoteric meaning. The Mandara mountain stands for space and the snake for time. Using the rod of space and the rope of time, each one churns out their own world from the "field (sea) of all possibilities" as it is referred to in quantum physics.

Lord Shiva had returned to Kailasa after having saved the world by swallowing the poison. There he heard how Vishnu had saved the day by taking on the form of Mohini, the most fascinating woman in the world. He became very desirous of seeing this alluring form of the Lord. Accompanied by Parvati and his host of goblins, he went to Vaikunta in order to see this enticing form.

Shiva said, "I have had occasion to see many of your wonderful incarnations but have never seen you as a woman. I'm most anxious to see this, so please show yourself to me as Mohini."

Vishnu smiled and said, "Are you sure you want to see it? It is a form that is calculated to arouse passion in every person, but of course you are a perfect yogi so it might not harm you." So saying, the Lord vanished from view. Suddenly Shiva felt that he was in a beautiful garden into which spring had just come. There, in the midst of the riotous blooms, he beheld a most charming young woman playing with a golden ball. Her doelike eyes darted hither and thither following the movements of the unpredictable ball, which was flying around as if bewitched by her beauty. The ball was not the only one to be thus bewitched. Shiva found that he had even forgotten the existence of his spouse standing beside him. He forgot everything except the entrancing young lady playing with the ball before him and started to chase her. The damsel cast him a bashful, sidelong glance as she darted past him, trailing her transparent garments that seemed to be slipping off her tantalizing breasts. She made a show of trying to hold up her slipping garments with her left hand while bouncing the ball with her right and danced off with a provocative glance at Shiva. Even Shiva, the great yogi, was totally carried away by Vishnu's *maya*, rhe great illusory power of the Lord, so how can ordinary mortals be blamed for falling under the spell of this *maya*? Before the astonished gaze of

Parvati, Shiva ran after Mohini. At last, tiring of the game, Vishnu as Mohini allowed herself to be caught in a fierce embrace by Rudra, whose passion had been inflamed by her beauty. She broke free and ran on, and Shiva's divine seed dropped on the ground as he followed in hot pursuit. Wherever Shiva's seed dropped, gold and silver mines sprang up. Suddenly Shiva came into possession of his senses and realized how he had been duped by the great Vishnu *maya*. He became serene once more, and Mohini resumed her original form as Vishnu.

Vishnu congratulated Shiva on having been able to overcome his *maya* that was so difficult for anyone to overcome. He asked, "Who but you can overcome the infatuation of my *maya* by his own efforts and come back to his original senses?"

It is said that out of this union of Hara and Hari, or Shiva and Vishnu, the *avatara* of Dharma Shasta was born. The boy was supposed to have been born from the thigh of Lord Vishnu, and combined in him the qualities of both of these deities.

Even Hanuman is said to be a manifestation of Shiva. The rest of the divine seed of Shiva was taken up in a leaf by the seven sages and given to Vayu, the wind God, to deposit in a suitable womb. Vayu carried the seed with him to the southern mountains. There he saw the maiden known as Anjana, who belonged to a family of monkeys. He deposited the seed in her, and the child she got from this came to be known as Hanuman. He is the one who helped Lord Vishnu in his incarnation as Sri Rama to defeat the demon king, Ravana.

Aum Namashivaya!

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Aum Gangadaraya Namaha!

19

The Descent of the River Ganga

O eyes of mine, behold Hara,
With the throat that swallowed the sea-spawned poison,
the Lord who eternally dances,
Swinging rhythmically His eight arms,
O eyes of mine,
Behold Him!

Saint Appar

There was once a king of the solar race called Sagara, who performed the *aswamedha yaga,* or horse sacrifice, in order to worship the Supreme Being. The sacrificial horse for the *yaga* was allowed to wander freely throughout the country and had to be followed closely by the king's army. Anyone who wanted to question the king's prowess would have to obstruct the horse and fight with the king's men. It is said that anyone who performed a hundred *aswamedha yagas* would be able to rule over the gods. When Sagara started his hundredth *yaga*, Indra, the king of the gods, became afraid that he would oust him from his position, so he stole the sacrificial horse and hid it away

in the nether regions next to the place where the great sage Kapila was meditating. When the horse disappeared, Sagara sent his people to search for it, but it was nowhere to be found. The hundred sons of the king now went forth to look for the horse and dug up the entire earth in their efforts. At last they found the horse in the netherworld, grazing happily beside the great sage Kapila. Their minds bewildered by their own evil propensities, they thought the sage to be the thief and pounced on him. Kapila opened his eyes, and the fire of austerity that blazed from his eyes, immediately consumed them. Hearing this news, the king's grandson, Amsuman, went forth to reprieve his uncles. He came to the place where the horse was tethered, immediately recognized the sage to be an enlightened soul, and begged him to release the horse and forgive his uncles. The sage blessed him and told him to take away the horse and complete his grandfather's sacrifice.

"Your uncles can be purified only by the holy waters of the River Ganga, which resides in the heavens," said Kapila. Amsuman returned and completed the *yaga,* but he was unable to do anything about bringing the Ganga to the earth in his lifetime. His son Dileepa also performed great *tapasya* but was unable to get the Ganga to the earth.

Next in the line of the glorious Ikshvaku dynasty was Prince Bhagiratha, son of Dileepa. When he heard of the great efforts made by his father and forefathers, he was determined that he would succeed where the others had failed and force the celestial Ganga to come to the earth and thus give salvation to his ancestors. Filled with determination, the young prince went to the Himalayas and performed rigorous penance for many years at the place now known as Gangotri.

At last the goddess Ganga was pleased and told him that she was willing to come down to the earth. "I'm pleased with your penance, O Bhagiratha," she said, "but if I come down, the force of my descent will crush the earth and she will not be able to survive the impact of my tremendous weight. So you will have to find someone who is capable of breaking my fall and bearing my weight. Moreover, when I come to the

earth, all human beings will wash off their sins in my pure waters and I will become polluted. Who will be there to purify me?"

Bhagiratha humbly replied, "O goddess, whenever a holy man comes and takes a bath in your waters, he will cleanse you from your contact with sinners. A holy man is a repository of all purity. The Lord, who is the essence of purity, ever lives in the hearts of the holy, and no impurity can remain in their presence. As for your first difficulty, Lord Shiva alone is capable of breaking your fall. He is the epitome of compassion. When he hears of the great benefit that would accrue to all humankind if you were to come to the earth, he will surely agree to help me."

Thus saying, Bhagiratha started on another bout of terrible penance by which he propitiated the compassionate Shiva and begged him to help him in this endeavor. Shiva agreed, and Bhagiratha once more begged Ganga to come down. The celestial Ganga is normally retained in the *kamandalu,* or water pot of the Creator, Brahma. In his *avatara* as Vamana, Vishnu took on a universal form in which one of his feet thrust its way into the world of Brahma. The Creator was overjoyed to see the lotus feet of the Lord and reverently poured Ganga water over the feet of Vamana. This was the holy water, purified by washing the feet of Lord Vishnu, that now came dashing down with all its force on to the earth. Playfully Ganga decided to test Shiva's strength and bore down with all her might on the planet. Shiva opened his locks and caught her in her impetuous fall so that not a drop remained, thus subduing her pride; she disappeared completely into his hair. Struggle as she might, not a drop could manage to squeeze out of Shiva's hair, which he calmly knotted up again. Poor Bhagiratha! Once again he was forced to meditate on the three-eyed Lord and beg him to release at least one portion of the heavenly Ganga so that his ancestors could gain peace. Having curbed Ganga's pride, the Lord was pleased to grant Bhagiratha's request and allowed a small trickle to escape from his topknot.

This is the Ganga we see today. What was only a small trickle to Shiva is a mighty torrent to us. The Ganga came out of the glacier known as Gomukh, which is in the form of a cow's mouth, in the lofty regions

of the Himalayas. Since the Ganga was brought down by Bhagiratha, her name in those regions is Bhageerathi. Since she is kept in Shiva's hair, she became his second wife, and Shiva came to be called Gangadhara.

Bhagiratha rode his horse swiftly down the Himalayan slopes with the river following closely behind. He had a long way to go before reaching the sea, where the ashes of his ancestors lay. On the way it is said that he passed the hermitage of the sage Jhanva, and since the river was about to destroy his *ashrama,* the sage calmly took her into himself through his left ear. Bhagiratha looked back to find that Ganga had disappeared, and guessing the cause, he returned and begged the sage to release her. Jhanva was only too happy to oblige, and he allowed Ganga to come out of his right ear. Thus she acquired the name Jhanavi, or daughter of Jhanva.

The stories of the sages are only meant to give us an inkling of the greatness of these holy men who were in such perfect control of themselves that they could manipulate the forces of nature. These sages were one with the supreme center of the universe and thus there was nothing they could not command. Ganga was reminded of the assurance of Bhagiratha that if any pure soul touched her, all the sins she had accumulated due to the sinners who had washed their sins off in her waters would in turn be destroyed. Thus the Ganga surged after Bhagiratha, purifying everything on her way until she reached the ocean near modern Calcutta. The ashes of the sons of Sagara were lying there, and she flowed over them and redeemed Bhagiratha's pledge of giving salvation to his ancestors. Despite their sin in having insulted a most holy person, these princes attained heaven through the indirect contact of their ashes with the holy waters of the Ganga. Bhagiratha's name has come to be synonymous with superhuman effort and valor in order to achieve impossible ends. It is to his glory that the Ganga is here with us today, ready to bless all those who bathe in her waters or pray to her with devotion. All devout Hindus hope that after death their ashes will be immersed in the heavenly Ganga by their children, for in that lies ultimate salvation.

I am formless and without any modification or attributes. I am all-pervading and free. I am ever the same all the time, neither bound nor liberated. I am the essence of consciousness and bliss—Shivoham! Shivoham!

"Nirvanashtakam" by Adi Shankaracharya

Aum Namashivaya!

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Aum Somaya Namaha!

20

Destroyed by His Own Hand

Henceforth O Father!
Instead of contemplating Thy divine feet day and
night, I shall brood on shedding this body on earth,
And enter the haven of your feet.
This is my serfdom.

Saint Manikkavachagar

Once there was a demon by the name of Bhasmaka who wanted to get control over the whole world. He decided to propitiate Lord Shiva by his *tapasya*. When the demon had practiced severe austerities for many years, Shiva was pleased to grant him any boon that he might choose. Bhasmaka, who had only one thought in his mind, immediately said, "Grant me the boon that anyone on whose head I place my hand will instantly become a heap of ashes. The very word "*bhasma*" means ashes, and perhaps his name might have prompted him to ask for this strange boon. Shiva, who is noted for his love of his devotees, granted the boon without thinking of the consequences of such an act. With the true asuric nature that does not hesitate to bite the

hand that feeds it, the demon immediately decided to try out the efficacy of the boon by placing his hand on his benefactor's head! He took two steps forward before Shiva realized his intentions. The only thing to do was to take to his heels, and this he did with Bhasmaka in hot pursuit. Shiva rushed to Vaikunta and begged Vishnu to help him. Vishnu immediately took on the form of Mohini, the temptress of the entire world, and stood before the advancing demon, who held his hand aloft in eager anticipation of the kill. When he saw Mohini blocking his way, he forgot his intentions and begged her to marry him. Vishnu, the arch deluder who can entice the whole universe with his *maya,* looked coyly at the lusty demon and hung her head in apparent bashfulness.

"I have taken an oath, O noble one, that I will bestow my favors only on the person who can defeat me in the art of dancing."

"O I'm an expert dancer," cried the infatuated *asura,* even though he was as "graceful" as a buffalo.

"Very good," said the damsel. "I will strike some poses, and you should follow them as best you can."

"Certainly!" said the demon, "but please make it short since I'm in a hurry to gather you up in my arms!"

Mohini smiled her secret smile. Without wasting time in further talk, she began striking pose after pose. She looked so ravishing in these beautiful, statuesque poses that Bhasmaka could hardly restrain himself from seizing her, but he managed to control his ardor and tried to imitate her as best he could. He was in such a hurry to get on with it and so entranced by her beauty that he hardly looked at what she was doing, but simply tried his best to copy her. At last Mohini struck a pose with her right hand on her own head. Without thinking, Bhasmaka did the same and was reduced to a heap of ashes.

Shiva is noted for his impetuosity, generosity, and gullibility. He is said to forget his own safety in his anxiety to serve his devotees. He blesses everyone and does not try to curb anyone, not even

the demons. He is quick to anger and as quickly appeased. Vishnu, on the other hand, is noted for shrewdness and his ability to contrive all situations, so that he was always the master of the situation and never the victim. Thus Vishnu saved Shiva, and Shiva was very grateful.

Aum Namashivaya!

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Aum Sadashivaya Namaha!

21

Markandeya and Agniswara

O Pure One, O Virtuous One!
O Lord with the proud bull of bloodshot eyes!
O limpid honey!
O water of life!
O Lord of beautiful eyes!
O lion among the immortals!
Pray tell me who is my kin here?

Saint Sundarar

There was once a poor Brahmin named Mrikandu, who was childless. He and his wife prayed to Lord Shiva to give them a son. Shiva appeared before them in a dream and asked, "Would you prefer to have a child who is brilliant in every way but who will die at the age of sixteen, or would you prefer a long-lived fool?"

After much consideration, the parents opted for the noble child. The baby who was born to them was indeed an exceptional child. Everyone who saw him was struck with wonder and delight. But as the child grew older, he noticed that his parents were always overprotective

of him. At last he questioned them about their extraordinary anxiety, and they told him the reason.

The boy answered, "Lord Shiva is said to be the cause of both mortality and immortality. Isn't he the one who granted your desire for a son? Will he not be able to grant me the boon of immortality if we pray to him?"

The parents were amazed by the young boy's faith. They encouraged him to do daily worship of the *linga,* which was installed in their little temple. The boy faithfully performed the worship of the *linga* in the prescribed manner. At last the day of his sixteenth birthday dawned. The anxious parents were loath to let the boy out of their sight, but the child was not in the least bit worried. He proceeded as usual to their family temple followed by his anxious parents. Just then he saw the frightening figure of Yama, Lord of death, striding beside him, carrying the noose in his hand. The boy ran toward the *linga,* and it is said that in each one of his footsteps a Shiva *linga* sprouted, blocking the path of the god of death. The boy ran into the temple and clasped the *linga* tightly with both his arms. Yama came forward and swung his noose round the boy, but since he was clutching the *linga* the noose went round both the child and the *linga.*

The frightened boy cried aloud, "O Shambho! Save me! Save me! I'm alone and helpless!"

Immediately the lord appeared out of the *linga* and spoke to him. "Fear not," he said gently, "I will not allow death to take you away." Then turning to Yama he said, "O Yama! You may now return to your abode. The child was given only sixteen years of life, and you have come at the appointed time to do your duty. You may take it from me that it has been done. Now I will take over."

Yama bowed to the Lord and said, "O Lord! You are the giver of both mortality and immortality. You are the Creator, Preserver, and Destroyer. What can I do but obey your commands?" So saying, he departed.

Shiva lifted up the child, who had closed his eyes since he was too

frightened to open them and watch the proceedings. "My dear child," said the Lord. "Have no fear. My devotee can never fall. Death himself will be helpless against my devotee. Your faith and devotion will not go unrewarded. I grant you a very, very long life. You will live for the whole of this *manvantaram* (cycle of time) and be acclaimed as a great sage. You will take up your residence in the Himalayas in the Kedar Kanda, at the holy spot of Badrikashrama. There you will live and do *tapasya* for the whole of this cycle of creation, and then join the formless essence at the end of that time. Have no fear. No one can harm you any more."

Thus saying the Lord departed. After staying with his parents for some time, Markandeya, as he came to be called, left for the Himalayas, for he realized that the sole aim of life was to contemplate the Supreme Lord. Many aeons passed with the sage in deep contemplation. As usual, Indra, the king of gods, became jealous of him, for he thought Markandeya's desire was to usurp his position. In order to entice the sage and make him fall prey to passion, Indra sent his retinue consisting of Kama, god of love, the *apsaras,* and other celestial maidens. Everywhere that Kama went, spring followed, accompanied by the perfumed *malaya* breeze. They went to the holy spot known as Badrikashrama, where the sage had his hermitage, and transformed that bleak spot into one of beauty. The vernal season set in. The crescent moon decorated the evening sky. Flowers bloomed in profusion, and the thick creepers were laden with blossoms dripping with honey. Inebriated bees buzzed around, intoxicated with the nectar that flowed in abundance. The atmosphere was enough to arouse pangs of love in the heart of the sternest ascetic. Kama arrived, carrying his bow of sugarcane and followed by a troupe of *apsaras* strumming their lutes and singing sweetly.

The sage was sitting in meditation with half-closed eyes after having finished offering his oblations into the flames of the sacrificial fire. He looked as lustrous as the fire itself. The *apsaras* came forward and started to dance. The musicians strummed their instruments softly,

as Kama drew his five-pronged arrow taut on the bow. The heavenly dancer Punjikasthali advanced slowly and sensuously and swayed in time to the music just in front of the sage. Her transparent clothes were coming loose and her whirling hair trailed over his face. It was at this opportune moment that Kama shot his arrows.

Markandeya opened his eyes. Indra and his companions, who were discreetly watching the proceedings from behind the safety of a bush, turned pale, for they had not forgotten what had happened to Kama when he had dared to do such a thing to Lord Shiva, at their own behest. This time Kama was trying the same stunt on one of Shiva's devotees, and they were a bit uncertain of the consequences of his action. They were ready and poised for flight if things appeared to be getting out of hand, but strangely enough, the sage was the gentlest of all souls. He saw the dancers standing bashfully in front of him and smiled at them. He was one with the Supreme, and he knew what was passing through their minds. He beckoned to Indra, who was peeping from behind the bush. Indra came forward shamefacedly and prostrated before him, asking Markandeya to forgive him. The sage assured Indra that he had not the slightest desire to usurp his position and that his only desire was to worship God without interference.

When Indra departed, the incarnations of Vishnu known as Nara and Narayana approached Markandeya in order to bless him. They told him to ask for any boon, and after much persuasion, the sage asked to be shown a glimpse of the Lord's divine *maya*. This was indeed a strange request. All of us are in the habit of asking the Lord to take away the veil of *maya* but Markandeya, who was ever immersed in atmic bliss, did not know the meaning of *maya*. The Lord smiled at this surprising request and agreed to comply.

As soon as they left, Markandeya found that black, glowering clouds were beginning to gather in the sky. Torrential rains came pouring down, and though he was sitting on the peak of a mountain, the ocean appeared to be rising up on all sides, so that Markandeya found his *ashrama* in danger of being washed away by flood. He was unable to

save himself from drowning in the waters, and for the first time since his sixteenth birthday he felt the emotion called fear. He floated for an infinite length of time on the waters of the deluge, tortured by pangs of hunger and pain, unable to find any hope of reprieve. He felt as if he had been swimming in this ocean of *samsara* for all time. He lost all recollection of his former life. At times he was totally submerged, and at times he was afloat.

He cried out piteously to the Lord to help him, and suddenly he saw a delicate banyan leaf floating on the waters. Lying on the leaf was a glorious infant, blue in color and eyes filled with love. The baby had taken up one of his own tiny feet with his two little hands and was sucking his big toe. It was a silent message to Markandeya that the only recourse for those who were drowning in the ocean of *samsara* was the lotus feet of the Lord. At the sight of this wondrous infant, the sage forgot his woes and was irresistibly drawn to the babe. As he stretched forth his arms to embrace him, he felt himself being drawn into the child through his breath. Within the child he saw the vision of the universe as he remembered having seen it before the deluge. The sky with all the galaxies, the heavens, the earth, the oceans, the forests, and the mountains were all there inside the heart of this wondrous infant. His own *ashrama* was also there. As he watched the scene in wonder, he was forcibly expelled from the child's stomach through his breath. Once again he was floating on the floodwaters, and the wondrous infant was lying on the water, cradled on the banyan leaf, just out of his reach. Overpowered by the loving sidelong glances of the infant, the sage swam forward to embrace him, but just as he stretched his arms out, the Lord disappeared, and Markandeya found himself back in his *ashrama* in the Himalayas and realized that the enormous passage of time that he had imagined to have passed was nothing but an instant. He had just experienced the glory of Vishnu's *maya*. All time is but an instant to the Lord. For him there is neither past nor future; there is nothing but a glorious present.

Seeing his devotee in this exalted state, Lord Shiva and his consort,

Parvati, came down to bless him. The sage was sitting with closed eyes, meditating on the form of the divine baby, when he found the vision to have been replaced by the forms of the divine couple. He opened his eyes and saw them standing before him. Shiva was the color of lightning. His matted locks were adorned with the crescent moon, and he was clad in an elephant hide. He was holding the trident, club, shield, sword, and bow, as well as the rosary of *rudraksha* beads. Parvati, mother of all the worlds, was standing beside him. Rising up in haste, Markandeya prostrated before them and extolled them. Shiva asked him to choose any boon.

Markandeya, who had just suffered from the effects of one boon, replied, "I have just experienced the drastic effect of Vishnu's *maya*. I want nothing more from this world. All I want is firm devotion to your feet and to the feet of Lord Vishnu and to all your devotees."

Lord Shiva replied, "O great and noble soul! All that you have asked for will be given to you. You will be free from the trammels of old age and death. Your lifespan shall extend to the length of the cosmic dissolution, as I already told you when I saved you from Yama's noose. You shall have knowledge of the past, present, and future, as well as complete renunciation and total illumination. The very sight of a holy man filled with renunciation is enough to purify a soul. The gods themselves yearn to have the sight of a holy person. Just by beholding you, all people will become purified. Your fame shall last for all time."

Thus blessing him, Lord Shiva and Parvati left the place. The sage, Markandeya, is said to be still meditating in the lonely regions of the Himalayas to this day, ready to bless all devotees of the Lord.

On the banks of the River Narmada was the beautiful city of Dharmapura. A Brahmin by the name of Visvanara lived there with his wife Suchismati. Both were great devotees of Lord Shiva and prayed to him for the boon of a son. In fact, they begged that Shiva himself would be

born as their son. The Lord agreed, and a son was born to the couple and was named Grahapati. When the boy was in his eleventh year, the celestial sage Narada read the boy's hand and foretold that some doom would come to him in a year's time, and it would be in the form of fire. The parents were grief stricken, but when he heard the cause of their sorrow, the young boy comforted them and told them to stop lamenting, for he would propitiate the Lord and thus avoid the doom awaiting him. Taking leave of his parents he proceeded to the famous town of Kasi, or Varanasi, which is supposed to be Lord Shiva's favorite resort. There he bathed in the famous Manikaran *ghat* (bathing steps) and worshipped the *linga* of the Lord for one full year. When the time foretold by Narada arrived, Indra, king of the gods, approached him and told him to ask for any boon. The boy refused and said that he would ask for boons only from Lord Shiva. Indra became furious and raised his thunderbolt to make an end of the impudent boy.

The boy raised his arms in supplication to Lord Shiva and begged him to save him. Shiva appeared before him and said, "O child, don't be afraid. It was I who appeared before you in the form of Indra in order to test you. No one can molest my devotee—not Indra, or his thunderbolt, or even death. I shall now give you the name of Agniswara. You will be made the guardian of the quarter of the Southeast. One who is devoted to you will never have fear of fire, or lightning, or premature death." Fire is said to be another form of Shiva. It is the third eye of the Lord.

Aum Namashivaya!

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Aum Kripanidaye Namaha!

22

The Manifestations of Shiva

O Heart of mine! Meditate on the immaculate one
With upstanding golden locks,
The consort of Devi,
Daughter of the cloud-capped mountain,
O heart of mine! Meditate on Him.

Saint Appar

Normally one does not associate Shiva with incarnations, but it is a fact that he has taken many manifestations at the behest of his devotees. We shall now try to describe a few of them.

One of the incarnations of Lord Vishnu was the man-lion Narasimha. After he had killed the demon Hiranyakashipu, it is said that his fury did not abate, and the entire world trembled with fear at the fire of destruction that was emanating from Narasimha's mouth. The gods approached Shiva and begged him to intervene, so Shiva took on the fierce form called Sharabha. He looked like a gigantic bird with an enormous curved beak and huge wings. His fangs jutted out, and his neck was black. He had powerful arms, four legs, and adamantine

claws. His three eyes were wide and blazing like the fires of destruction at the end of the world. Like a vulture seizing a serpent, the creature caught hold of the Narasimha in its claws and killed him. Then all the gods sang his praises.

Shiva assumed his own form and said, "Just as there is no change in constitution when milk is poured into milk, or water into water, or ghee into ghee, so also Vishnu and I are one, and it makes no difference whether I kill him or he kills me. In actual fact we are both immortals, and neither of us can be killed. It is only our *lila*. Like actors who don different costumes to amuse the spectators, we play different roles for the sake of our devotees."

Once there was a sage named Shilada. He did *tapasya* to Indra to be blessed with a son. When Indra appeared, Shilada asked for the boon of a son who would be immortal, but Indra said it was impossible for him to grant immortality. The only person who could grant him such a boon was Shiva, so Shilada started to meditate on Shiva. After many years, when his body was reduced to a mere skeleton, Shiva appeared and told him that he himself would be born as his son. Shilada now started a *yajna*. At the end of it a child emerged from the fire. He had three eyes and four arms and held a trident and mace. He wore armor made of diamonds. The gods showered flowers on this new incarnation of Shiva. Since the child had brought joy to everyone, he was named Nandi, which is the short form for *ananda,* or bliss. However, as soon as the child was taken to Shilada's hermitage, his divine appearance vanished and he became an ordinary human child. He also appeared to have forgotten his divine origin. Though Shilada was disappointed, he controlled himself and concentrated on giving the child a good education.

One day two gods, Mitra and Varuna, appeared in the hermitage. They looked carefully at the boy and told the father that although he appeared to have all auspicious signs, he would not live beyond the age of eight years.

Shilada was naturally most upset at this bit of news and started to weep. When Nandi heard the reason for his father's grief, he prayed to Shiva. The Lord appeared and told Shilada not to cry, for the child was immortal. He promised to keep the child with him always. Shiva took off his necklace and put it round the child's neck. Immediately Nandi resumed his divine form, and Parvati adopted him as her own child. He was elected as one of the *ganapatis,* or the leaders of the *ganas* of Shiva. Thus you find that Nandi, in the form of a bull, is always seated in front of Shiva.

Countless are the manifestations that Lord Shiva is said to have taken to test his devotees and bless them. We will narrate only a few here. Once in the village of Nandigrama, in the Madurai district, there lived a very beautiful prostitute called Mahananda who was a great devotee of Shiva. She was an adept in all the arts, especially the art of love. Despite her nocturnal activities, she still found time to dance and sing for the Lord of her heart, who was Shiva. Outside the bedchamber she would don only simple clothes and wear *rudraksha* beads, which are loved by Shiva, and smear ashes on her forehead. She had as pets a monkey and a rooster that she decorated with *rudrakshas.* She had taught them to dance when she sang songs to the Lord. Her strange vocation coupled with her devotion to him intrigued Shiva and he decided to test her. He went to her house in the guise of a merchant named Vaishyanatha. Wearing a necklace of *rudraksha* beads, he entered the house chanting the names of Shiva. Mahananda was delighted to receive him, not only because he was a handsome man but also because he seemed to be a devotee of her Lord. As she seated him and paid honor to him, her eyes were drawn to a beautiful gold bangle studded with gems on his wrist.

"What a beautiful bangle you have," she said, eyeing it greedily. The merchant guessed her desire to possess it and said, "You can have it if you want, but let me warn you that it is a very valuable bit of jewelry. What price can you pay for it?"

She answered, "I come from a family of harlots. How else can I pay you but with the coin of love?"

"Very well," said the merchant. "How much do you think this is worth?"

She answered, "If you give it to me, I will be your wife for three days and three nights."

The merchant readily agreed and asked her to repeat the oath three times with the sun and the moon as witnesses. She did so, and the merchant handed over the bangle to her. He also gave her a *linga* of Shiva covered with scintillating gems and told her to keep it in a very safe place since it was most precious to him. She took the image and kept it devoutly on an altar in the center of the stage where she danced. The cock and the monkey kept guard. Mahananda and the merchant spent the night together but at midnight they were awakened by the crowing of the cock and the crying of the monkey. A big fire was blazing across the stage and the whole place was consumed, along with the image.

The merchant was bereft when he saw this and bewailed his loss. "I have no desire to live after having lost my precious idol," he said, "Prepare a pyre for me immediately, and I shall jump into it and end my useless life."

Though Mahananda cried and pleaded, the merchant was adamant, and after going round the fire thrice, he took a flying leap into the flames. The woman was desperate when she saw this. Though she was only a prostitute, she was a great devotee of Shiva, and she had given her word to the merchant to be his wife for three days and three nights, and now she could no longer keep her faith.

"Greedy for a mere jewel, I took an oath that I would be his wife for three days and three nights. Now that he is dead I can no longer keep my word. My only recourse is to keep to the vow of a chaste wife and enter into the flames with him."

Despite the pleas of her relatives, she was firm in her resolve and prepared to jump into the fire after her husband. Fixing her mind on

the feet of her Lord, Shiva, she took a step back in order to jump. Just then Shiva appeared before her in all his glory and stopped her.

Catching hold of her hands he consoled her, "It was I who came to you in the form of a merchant in order to test your piety, courage, and devotion to me. It was I who produced the burning fire that consumed your stage and the *linga*. You have passed your test admirably. Now you can ask for any boon you wish."

The prostitute was overwhelmed by the Lord's grace and said, "I have no desire for the pleasures of this earth or the heavens or anywhere else. All I desire is the touch of your lotus feet. My servants, maids, and relatives are all your devotees. Please take them along with me to your holy abode and take away from us the terrible fear of repeated births." Hearing this, the Lord was very happy and took her and her kinsmen and attendants to his abode.

This story shows us how the Lord is more aware of our intentions than our actions. The woman was a prostitute by birth. To her, prostitution was a job like any other job, but her private life was dedicated entirely to the Lord. She had no choice where her work was concerned, but her heart was always fixed on Shiva. The Lord who sees into our hearts judges us not by our external show but by our internal purity.

Another delightful manifestation of Lord Shiva is Kirata, the hunter. The Pandavas, and Arjuna in particular, were all devotees of Shiva. Their cousins, the Kauravas, exiled them to the forest. At that time Lord Krishna came to them and advised Arjuna to make the best use of his time in the forest by placating Lord Shiva and asking for his powerful missile, the *pasupata*. With this weapon Arjuna would be able to defeat the Kauravas in battle, which Krishna knew to be inevitable.

Thus advised by Krishna, Arjuna went to the mountain called Indrakila, in the Himalayas near the place called Badrikashrama. While he was meditating with closed eyes and matted locks and subsisting only on leaves and berries, his wicked cousin Duryodana instigated a demon

called Muka to go and molest Arjuna and distract him from his *tapasya*. Muka took the form of a wild boar and charged into the forest. But Lord Shiva never forsakes his devotees. Taking the form of a hunter, or *kirata,* he went into the forest and chased the boar. Parvati accompanied him in the form of a huntress, or *kirati*. Hearing the tremendous sounds made by the boar and the hunter, Arjuna opened his eyes and saw the boar rushing into the clearing where he was sitting. Immediately Arjuna strung his bow and shot the beast as it charged toward him where he sat before a mud *linga* of Shiva that he had made for his worship. At the same moment, the *kirata* also shot the boar; both arrows found their mark simultaneously. Arjuna went forward to retrieve his arrow, and at the same time, Shiva, in the form of the *kirata,* strode out of the thicket into the clearing. Shiva always enjoyed teasing his devotees, and Arjuna was especially beloved by him. In an angry voice Shiva said, "Halt! Don't touch the beast. It's mine. Shot by my arrow."

Arjuna was quite indignant when he heard this and retorted scornfully, "Do you know who I am? I am Arjuna, the famous archer. How can you, a mere forest dweller, ever hope to equal my prowess in archery? Of course it was my arrow that shot the boar."

The heated verbal argument soon led to a fight, and they decided to test their prowess with bows. A dreadful battle ensued between the Lord and Arjuna in which Shiva mentally applauded his devotee's dexterity. But despite all his skill Arjuna was no match for the divine archer. Arjuna was amazed that a lowborn tribal could beat him in archery. He did not know what to do and asked for a short respite. This was granted, and Arjuna quickly made a garland of wild flowers and adorned the neck of the *linga* he had been worshipping faithfully for many months and begged Lord Shiva to save him. Fortified with renewed hope and courage, he turned round to face his opponent and was astonished to see the garland that he had just placed round the *linga* adorning the neck of the fake hunter. It was only then that Arjuna understood that it was all the Lord's play. He ran forward to prostrate himself at the divine hunter's feet and beg pardon for the

great offense he had done in daring to fight with him. Shiva now revealed his true form with Parvati by his side and the *ganas* frolicking around them. Arjuna prostrated again and again and begged Shiva to forgive him.

Shiva laughingly declared, "It was a great experience to fight with you. I'm proud of your prowess. You may now ask me for any boon you wish."

Arjuna was so ashamed that he did not dare to ask for the weapon for which he had been doing *tapasya*. "All I want is to have devotion to your holy feet all my life," he said. Shiva, who could see into his heart, insisted that he could ask for anything he wished and it would be granted to him. At last Arjuna asked for Shiva's weapon, the *pasupata*.

Lord Shiva answered, "I shall certainly present you with my own missile, the powerful *pasupata,* by which you will become invincible. You will be able to defeat your enemies and regain your kingdom." After having thus blessed Arjuna, the Lord returned to his own abode, and Arjuna rejoined his brothers and their wife, Draupadi, in the forest.

The beautiful temple of Kanyakumari is situated at the southernmost tip of the Indian subcontinent. It is dedicated to the virgin goddess and has a beautiful story connected with it. At the request of the gods, Parvati, the consort of Shiva, was once forced to take birth on earth in order to kill some demons. Her name in her earthly form was Punyakshi, and she was naturally a great devotee of Lord Shiva. She longed with all her heart to marry him. However, the gods did not want her to marry, since only a virgin had the power to kill the demons. She begged Shiva to intercede with the gods on her behalf and come and take her as his bride. Ever ready to comply with the wishes of his devotee, Shiva asked the gods to allow him to marry her. The gods could not refuse the request, but they thought of a trick by which they could stop the wedding.

"Anyone who marries her will have to pay the bride price," they said.

"What is this price?" asked Lord Shiva.

"The bride price is a sugarcane stem without rings, a betel leaf without veins, and a coconut without eyes," they said.

Shiva laughed at their tricks and conjured up these gifts in a trice. "Now you can fix the time for the wedding," he told the astonished gods.

They were determined to thwart him somehow, so they said, "You will have to marry her before the cock crows tomorrow, or else you will have to wait till the end of this age." This was quite a challenge, since Punyakshi lived at the very tip of the Indian peninsula and Shiva at the very top, in Kailasa. Shiva agreed and set out immediately for the South. Just before he reached Kanyakumari, he heard the cock crow. The gods had duped him by making the cock crow at midnight. Thinking it to be dawn, Shiva decided that there was no point in proceeding further, since he would not be able to reach his bride before the appointed time. He broke his journey and decided to stay in the form of a *linga* in the town called Suchindram, close to Kanyakumari. There he remains, waiting for the end of this epoch in order to keep his promise to his beloved Punyakshi.

Punyakshi was told of the time of the nuptials, and she decked herself out in all her bridal finery and waited for the Lord to appear. The guests arrived, and even the food had been prepared for the feast that would follow the wedding. Unfortunately, Shiva was unable to keep his promise since the gods had seen to it that he was obstructed on the way. The cock crowed as the sun rose, and there was no bridegroom. Punyakshi was terribly disappointed. She burst into tears, kicked the pots of food into the sand, and threw away her ornaments.

The demons teased her and said, "Why don't you marry us instead!" She was so furious that she picked up a sickle and threw it at them and killed the whole lot of them, much to the delight of the gods, who had gleefully planned the whole coup. Punyakshi took up her abode at the very tip of the subcontinent of India and came to be known as the virgin goddess—Kanyakumari. There she waits to this

day for Shiva, her betrothed. The gods promised her that at the end of this cycle of cosmic evolution she would be united with her Lord. The food she overturned mixed with the sand, and even today we find sand of many different colors and shapes on the beach of Kanyakumari.

Meenakshi, princess of the ancient Tamil kingdom of Madurai, was born with three breasts. The astrologers foretold that she would lose her middle breast only when she came face to face with the man she would marry. It seemed most improbable that Meenakshi would marry at all, since she had a very masculine temperament and preferred to learn the art of warfare over the accomplishments of a princess. She became the general of her father's army. She led them north, south, east, and west, to all four corners of the country, conquering the whole land right up to the Himalayas and overcoming all the intrepid kings who dared to oppose her.

While in the Himalayas she heard of a hermit who was very powerful and refused to bow to the dictates of the *kshatriyas* (warrior caste). No king had yet been able to vanquish him. She was determined that she would be the one to do so. She charged ahead of the rest of the brigade but was suddenly accosted by a handsome hermit who blocked her path. She ordered the man to move out of her way. He merely smiled and refused to budge. Infuriated by his behavior, she jumped off her horse and ran toward him with upraised sword. He laughed in her face and did not flicker an eyelid. As she raised her indignant eyes to glare at this upstart, she was startled into immobility. Her third breast dropped of its own accord, and she felt as if she were melting in the penetrating gaze of the ascetic. Her upraised arm came down, and the sword dropped to the ground. She bent low at the feet of the handsome hermit, who was none other than Lord Shiva. She herself was Parvati, who had taken on the form of Meenakshi in order to play out the divine *lila*. The gods rained flowers on the couple and the wedding of Sundareswara, as this manifestation of Shiva was called, and Meenakshi was presided over by Vishnu himself.

To this day the divine couple is worshipped in the temple of Meenakshi in Madurai, in Tamil Nadu.

There was a time when the sages who lived in the forests and practiced severe austerities became filled with ego and thus fell from their high code of conduct. To teach them a lesson, Shiva took on the form of a handsome young hermit, which apparently was a role he loved, and went into the forest. When they saw him the sages and their wives ran after him and begged him to stay with them, promising to change their ways and do whatever he wished them to do. Shiva laughed contemptuously at their request. They were furious at the lack of respect shown to them by the young hermit, and with their magic powers they created a tiger, a serpent, and a goblin, and set them on the young man. Shiva killed the tiger and took the skin for his garment, twined the serpent round his neck, and jumped on the goblin's back and started to dance. It was a macabre dance, shaking the very foundations of the earth. His flying locks crashed into the heavenly bodeis, his footstep split the mountains, and his arms whirled amongst the stars. The gods descended from the heavens, and the demons abandoned the nether regions in order to watch this awe-inspiring dance. As the dance went on and on to the accompaniment of celestial music, the sages realized that what Shiva had done was to flay the tiger of their ambition, tame the serpent of their passion, and crush the goblin of their ego. His wild dance was the very essence of life, the cosmic cycle of creation, organization, and destruction. It was the mad dervish dance of the protons, neutrons, and all the energy particles that make up this world of matter, throbbing with energy. He was the Creator, the Preserver, and the Destroyer. In his right hand he held the rattle drum, which produces the sound that emanates from the throat at the point of death, and also the reverberation at the onset of birth. In his left hand he held the fire that burns and destroys, yet illuminates and cooks the food that supports life. Around him revolved the huge wheel of time, the wheel of *samsara,* the cycle of infinite births and deaths. The

gods, sages, and other celestial beings watched spellbound at this awesome spectacle of the Lord as Nataraja, the cosmic dancer. It was this dance that inspired the great treatise on Natyashastra, or the science of dance, by the sage Bharata. This event is immortalized in bronze in the awe-inspiring figure of Shiva as Nataraja, in the temple of Chidambaram in South India.

Aum Namashivaya!

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Aum Bhaktavalsalaya Namaha!

23

Shiva, the Beloved

I am not the intellect, mind, ego, or perception,
I am not the sense of hearing, taste, smell, or sight,
I am not the sky, earth, fire, or air,
I am the essence of consciousness and bliss—Shivoham!
Shivoham!

"Nirvanashtakam" by Adi Shankaracharya

The tales of Vishnu and Shiva intermingle with each other so that sometimes Vishnu is said to be worshipping Shiva, and vice versa. Once, it is said, Vishnu promised to worship Shiva with one thousand and eight lotuses. Lotuses are normally used in the worship of Vishnu himself. Vishnu said that he would repeat the 1,008 names of Shiva and offer one lotus for every name. In order to test Vishnu, Shiva removed one lotus from the bunch so that at the end of the *puja* it would be one flower short. Not in the least put out, Vishnu, the lotus-eyed one, plucked out one of his own beautiful eyes and placed it on the *linga*. Shiva was so pleased with this gift of love and sacrifice that he presented the Sudarshana Chakra (sharp-edged, spinning weapon of time) to Lord Vishnu.

Ravana, the demon king, was a great devotee of Shiva. Every day he

traveled in his aerial car from his island city of Lanka, which lay off the coast of India in the extreme south, to Shiva's abode in Kailasa, which was in the Himalayas in the extreme north. After a time he wearied of these daily trips and hit upon a master plan: He decided to bring Shiva and his entire entourage to Lanka. The easiest way, thought Ravana, was to uproot the whole mountain of Kailasa and bring it to his own city. He put his hands under the mountain and started to shake it. Parvati was quite annoyed at this outrage and begged Shiva to stop Ravana's impudence. Shiva simply pressed the ground down with his big toe and the mountain crashed on Ravana's hand. Ravana howled with pain and begged Shiva to release him, but Shiva refused to listen. It is said that Ravana then composed the famous *Shiva Thandava* hymn that impressed Shiva so much that he released Ravana's hand and allowed him to go, with his blessing.

Ravana next designed a musical instrument known as the *rudravina* and presented it to Shiva. The latter offered him a boon. The demon king, true to his nature, immediately asked for Parvati herself!

Shiva laughed and said, "So be it. Go and get her. She is bathing in the lake of Manasarovar." With his usual impish humor, he wanted to know how his wife would deal with this situation.

Ravana rushed to the lake, but Parvati's attendants had already informed her of these odd happenings, so she was quite ready for Ravana. She picked up a frog, or *manduka,* and transformed it into a beautiful female and called her Mandodari. When Ravana arrived he found this fascinating woman sitting on a rock beside the lake. Never having seen Parvati before and having no occasion to doubt Shiva's words, he thought the woman to be Parvati and carried her off to Lanka to be his wife.

Kubera, a great devotee of Shiva, was actually Ravana's brother. Kubera, Ravana, and Vibhishana were the three sons of the sage Vaisravana. Lanka had originally belonged to Kubera, but Ravana defeated him,

threw him out of the city, and appropriated all of Kubera's possessions, including his marvelous aerial vehicle, Pushpaka. The displaced Kubera roamed the world, unhappy and forlorn. At last he came to the city of Kasi, which is famous for the temple of Shiva, and there he meditated on the three-eyed Lord, who appeared before him and gave him many boons. Shiva fell for Kubera in a big way, since he was short and misshapen with a big potbelly and only one eye; Shiva delighted in helping those whom everybody else shunned. He told Kubera that he could go and live in the city of Alakapuri in the Himalayas near Kailasa and made him the overlord of the Yakshas and Kinnaras, and custodian of all the wealth of the netherworld.

Kubera was so fond of Shiva that he wanted to please him by giving him gifts. Since he was guardian of all wealth, he wished to present Shiva with a large amount of money and jewels. Shiva laughed at the enormity of Kubera's pride in thinking that he could actually please Shiva, the Great Lord of the worlds, with wealth. When Kubera insisted, Shiva told him that if he was so anxious to do something for him, he could feed his son, Ganesha, who was never satisfied with the food he got in Kailasa. Kubera agreed, thinking this was an easy task. The next day Ganesha went to Alakapuri, where a huge feast had been specially prepared for him. Kubera welcomed him with all honors and placed an enormous repast before him consisting of every type of delicacy one could imagine, all prepared in gargantuan quantities. Ganesha polished off all that was put before him and asked for more. Much more was prepared and served, but that also disappeared in a trice. Kubera was frightened that Ganesha's belly would burst.

Ganesha guessed what was passing through his mind and pointed to the snake that was encircling his stomach and said, "Look at this snake. It will ensure that my stomach will not burst, so you don't have to worry about that. Please prepare more food, since my hunger has not been appeased. You promised my father that you would satisfy my hunger, and now you seem to be backing out of your bargain."

This feast went on until Kubera exhausted all his wealth, and still

Ganesha's appetite could not be appeased. At last Kubera realized his mistake and fell at Ganesha's feet. Kubera begged Ganesha's pardon for having been so presumptuous as to suppose that his wealth was so great that he could buy anything with it, including the gods. Ganesha is known for teaching people to keep their egos in check.

The demon Bana was another great devotee of Lord Shiva. He had a thousand hands and he often pleased Shiva by playing a thousand percussion instruments while Shiva danced the *thandava*. Shiva was pleased with Bana's devotion, which took the form of this unusual accompaniment to his dance, and told him to choose a boon. Bana, with true demonic guile, immediately asked Shiva to be the watchman of his palace.

One day Bana came to Shiva and told him that his thousand arms were itching for a good fight. He could not find anyone in all the worlds who would be able to defeat him.

"The thousand arms that you have given me have become a burden to me. I'm longing to have a good fight with someone, but anyone I approach runs away upon seeing my many arms. In my eagerness for a fight I have crushed mountains to powder, sent elephants to their quarters, and smashed the earth into bits, but still I'm dissatisfied. I want a worthy opponent."

Shiva said, "O Bana! Know that when your flagstaff breaks in two, you will find someone to match your mettle, but remember that he will also be the one to extinguish your pride."

Bana was delighted to hear that he would find someone who would be able to grapple with his thousand arms. He watched his flagstaff daily for any sign of breakage. He did not pay much attention to the second half of Shiva's prophecy.

Bana had a beautiful daughter called Usha, who fell in love with Lord Krishna's grandson, Aniruddha. They had a clandestine affair, and the prince stayed in her private apartments without the knowledge

of anyone except her close friend. However, after some time the news leaked out. When Bana heard this, he was furious and had Aniruddha put into prison. Hearing of his grandson's fate, Krishna marched with the Yadava army to Bana's capital, and there ensued a glorious combat between Bana and Krishna, in which Bana was helped by Shiva and his *ganas,* since Shiva had promised to guard him. Bana's flagstaff came crashing down as soon as Lord Krishna arrived, and Bana realized that he would soon meet his match, as foretold by Shiva. After a terrific fight in which Bana's army was completely routed, Krishna had Bana at his sword point. Krishna spared his life but methodically proceeded to chop off all Bana's arms, since it appeared that they were directly responsible for his inordinate pride. When only two pairs were left, Shiva intervened and begged Krishna to spare Bana's life and the remainder of his arms, since Bana was his devotee.

Lord Krishna said, "O worshipful Lord! Whoever is dear to you is dear to me. I will never kill this *asura*. No doubt I chopped off all his extra arms that were proving a burden to him, but I will spare the four that are left and give him the boon that these arms will never age and will retain their adamantine strength till the end of his days."

Bana was delighted when he heard this and was happy to give his daughter, Usha, to the handsome Yadava prince, Aniruddha. Thus we see that in the *lilas* of Shiva and Vishnu, at times one defeats the other and at other times the roles are reversed, thus enabling both to keep their devotees happy.

> *The Atman is all-pervading and self-revealed. It has no support. The universe of name and form is insignificant and is separate from Me, the one Atman without a second, attributeless and indestructible, even when the whole of creation is destroyed. It is of the nature of supreme bliss and purity.*
>
> "Dasisloka" by Adi Shankaracharya

O Resident of the mountains and giver of all good,
make your arrow peaceful; do not destroy the people of
the material world.

"Sri Rudrum," *Yajur Veda*

From food all creatures are produced, as many as on
earth are found.
By food they live and food they become, when at last
they are buried in the earth.
There is another self than this one consisting of food.
That is the one consisting of vital energy.
There is still another self than this one consisting of
vital energy—The one consisting of mind.
Verily there is another self than this one consisting of
mind—
The one consisting of consciousness—
The one consisting of bliss.

Taittiriya Upanishad

Aum Namashivaya!

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Aum Haraya Namaha!

24
The *Jyotirlingas*

O Destroyer!
The burning ghat is your playground,
Your companions are monsters,
Besmeared are you with the ashes of funeral pyres,
Your garland is a string of skulls,
Your name and nature seem inauspicious.
Yet, O giver of blessings!
Those who meditate on you,
Are supremely auspicious.

"Shiva Mahima Stotram"

The thirteenth night of the dark half of every lunar month is special to Shiva and is known as Pradosha, or Shivaratri. Normally gods are not worshipped in the dark half of the lunar month. This period when the moon is waning is usually considered inauspicious for starting anything. Demons and ghosts move about at this time, and only Shiva can control them. As we have seen, Shiva always proved that, to the yogi, the word "inauspicious" has no meaning. So on those days when the crescent moon is out, people pray to Shiva to keep all evil from them. The thirteenth night of the waning phase of the moon, which comes in

the month of Phalguna, February/March, is known as Mahashivaratri. This was the day when Shiva drank the dreaded *halahala* poison during the churning of the milky ocean. It is said that all the gods kept vigil with him, singing his praises. So on this particular day in the month of Phalguna, when the winter mists are melting into spring, all the devotees of Shiva keep awake, chanting and praying to the great Lord and offering worship to him. Ganga water is poured on the *linga* to cool him from the heat of the poison.

On one such Mahashivaratri day, a hunter who had none of this esoteric knowledge lost his way in the jungle. Frightened of wild animals, he took shelter on top of a *bel* tree. The leaves of this tree have three segments corresponding to the three eyes of Shiva, and they are very special in his worship. To keep himself from falling off the tree, the hunter continuously plucked the leaves of the tree and threw them to the ground. It so happened that there was a *linga* just below this tree, so that without his knowledge he worshipped the Lord on that particular night, fasting and keeping awake and offering the leaves of the *bel* tree to the *linga*. In the morning Shiva appeared before him and blessed him. Adoration of Shiva on Mahashivaratri day, even though performed without knowledge, brings its own reward.

The story about this festival as told in the Mahabharata features a king named Chitrabhanu, who was said to have observed the fast with great enthusiasm. In his previous life he had been a hunter named Suswara. Once, as night fell over the forest, the hunter could not return home, so he climbed to the top of a *bel* tree and took shelter. Tormented by thirst he started to cry, and his tears fell on a *linga* of Shiva, which was beneath the tree. In order to keep awake and not fall off the tree, he started to pluck the leaves of the tree and drop them down. That night happened to be the night of Mahashivaratri, and the hunter inadvertently worshipped the Shiva *linga* throughout the night, fasting and keeping vigil. As a reward for this he was born as the king Chitrabhanu in his next life.

In a dialogue between Shiva and Parvati, the latter asked Shiva which ritual pleased him most.

Shiva replied, "The fourteenth night of the new moon in the dark fortnight of the month of Phalguna is my favorite day. My devotees who fast on this day and worship me during the four periods of the night with *bel* leaves are most pleasing to me. These leaves are more precious to me than jewels. *Abhisheka* (ritualistic bathing) should be done in the four watches of the night. During the first watch I should be bathed in milk; during the second watch in curd; in the third, in ghee; and in the fourth, in honey. On the following day the devotee should break his fast only after feeding the poor. O Parvati! There is no ritual that pleases me more than this!"

The cosmic primeval condition of the divine before creation is a state that resembles night or darkness. This is Shiva's night, or Shivaratri, and this is the state of Shiva. Therefore he is worshipped during the night and is known to be the representative of *tamas,* the third *guna*. This darkness, or *tamas,* is due to the excess of light and not to the absence of light. When the frequency of light is intensified to a very high level, it is incapable of being seen by human eyes. Some lights are called blinding lights. This is because when we look at such a light, our eyes see only darkness. God is really the light of all lights and thus invisible to human sight. The owl cannot look at the sun; it can only see in darkness. So the human soul, which has not realized the greatness of God, cannot see the blinding light of God. Shiva, the compassionate one, thus takes the form of night and extols us to worship him as darkness, in order to train our mystical eyes to develop and see him in all his splendor. This is the esoteric significance of Mahashivaratri, the night of Shiva.

Worship of the *linga* is one of the most important aspects of devotion to Shiva, since it is believed that he is present in the *linga*. The word *linga* actually means "a sign," or "characteristic." The Absolute Brahman is formless and has no attributes, so it has no *linga*. However, human beings need some form that makes it easier for the mind

to concentrate, so the *linga,* which is a rounded, upright stone, is used as a symbol of Brahman.

At one point, Shiva is said to have stood for thousands of years on one foot making himself into an axis for the revolving universe. This figure has no beginning and no end and is the cosmic *linga* of Shiva. The Shiva *linga* is also considered to be the divine phallus, containing within it the seed of the universe; from it all life is created. Together with the *yoni,* or seat on which it rests and which corresponds to the female vulva, the *yoni-linga* represents the union of man and woman, Shiva and Shakti, the cosmic Spirit in union with the cosmic Prakriti, which brings everything into existence.

It is said that one time the sage Brighu went to Kailasa and found Shiva and Parvati so lost in love that they did not even notice his presence. The sage cursed Shiva that in the future he would be worshipped without form, as a *linga* trapped within a *yoni.*

Another story describes how Shiva, the handsome hermit, roamed amongst the *devataru* (deodar) forests of the Himalayas. Seeing his irresistible body, the wives of the hermits ran after him. The sages cursed Shiva that he would lose his handsome form. Shiva immediately turned into a fiery *jyotirlinga* (a column of light shaped like a linga) that threatened to annihilate the entire universe. The sages were terrified and ran to Parvati to save the world. She immediately took the form of a receptacle, or *yoni,* and captured the *jyotirlinga.* Shiva's fury abated, and he asked the sages and their wives to worship the *linga-yoni* and curb their lust and anger. The *yoni* represents the Divine Mother. It has a utilitarian aspect also. It acts as the base for the *linga* and collects the water, milk, and so forth that are poured over the *linga* during *puja.*

THE TWELVE *JYOTIRLINGAS*

There are thousands of *lingas* all over India, but some of them have special importance. The most important of these, the *jyotirlingas,* are

twelve in number: Somanatha, Mallikarjuna, Mahakala, Omkara, Kedara, Bhimashankara, Vishvanatha, Tryambaka, Vaidyanatha, Nagesha, Rameshwara, and Ghushnesha. Most of them have sprouted up of their own accord. Others have been installed by human hands.

1. Somanatha

We have already seen how Chandra, or Soma as the moon god is called, was one of Daksha's sons-in-law. Daksha had cursed him that he would waste away and die, and Soma had appealed to Lord Shiva to save him from this curse. The place where Soma prayed to Shiva is known as Somanatha. It is the first of the *jyotirlingas*.

2. Mallikarjuna

We also heard the story of how Shiva's son Kartikeya left Kailasa and went to live on a hill in the southern regions. Parvati was bereft at his departure and begged Shiva to take her to her son. Kartikeya refused to have them live on his hill, so Shiva and Parvati took up their residence on the hill of Mallikarjuna, and this is the second *jyotirlinga*.

3. Mahakala

The ancient city of Avanti, modern Ujjain, is situated on the River Kshipra. There were four Brahmins in that city who were great devotees of Shiva. On one of the hills opposite the city lived a demon called Dhushana, who killed anyone who practiced Vedic rites or worshipped Shiva. When he heard of the four Brahmins of Avanti, he went there to kill them. Not in the least disturbed, the brothers continued praying to the *linga*. Suddenly the *linga* split open with a tremendous sound, and Shiva leapt out, brandishing the weapons of destruction. His form was that of Mahakala, the great Destroyer. Dhushana was burnt to ashes, and his men took to their heels. The Brahmins begged Shiva to stay there forever. The Lord agreed, and this is the *jyotirlinga* known as Mahakala.

4. Omkareshwara

Once the celestial sage Narada visited the mountain Vindhya. The mountain offered worship to the sage, but Narada knew that Vindhya was puffed up with pride, so in his usual bantering fashion he told Vindhya that the mountain Sumeru was superior to it. Vindhya wanted to become the equal of Sumeru and began doing *tapasya* to Lord Shiva. When Shiva appeared, Vindhya begged him to remain there all the time to make it the equal of Sumeru. Shiva agreed, and this is the fourth *jyotirlinga,* Omkara, which is situated on the banks of the Narmada River.

5. Kedarnatha

There are two stories connected with the fifth *jyotirlinga,* Kedara, which is in the Himalayas. One is associated with the Pandavas. At the end of their sojourn on earth, the five Pandava brothers, along with Draupadi, proceeded to that part of the Himalayas known as Kedarkanda. On their way they found that a wild-looking dog and a noble buffalo had joined their party. Recognizing the buffalo to be none other than their personal deity, Lord Shiva, the Pandavas chased him. Eventually Shiva allowed himself to be caught. Each of the five brothers caught one part of the animal and to their consternation, it came apart into five pieces in their hands. They threw the pieces far and wide, and the places where the pieces fell came to be known as the Panch Kedars, which are all very important places in the Himalayas for the worship of Shiva. The hump of the buffalo fell at the most important of these places, and this is the *jyotirlinga* known as Kedara. Unlike other *lingas,* the *linga* at Kedara is in the shape of the hump of a buffalo.

The second story pertaining to Kedara is connected with the dual incarnation of Vishnu, known as Nara-Narayana. These two sages were said to be constantly meditating in Kedarkanda in the place called Badrikashrama, which is an important place of pilgrimage for the devotees of Vishnu. After a long time, Shiva appeared to the sages

and offered them a boon. They requested that he always be present as a *linga* on the peak of Kedara.

6. Bhimashankara

During the time of the *avatara* of Vishnu as Rama, he had killed both the demon king, Ravana, and his brother, Kumbakarna. The latter's wife was Karkati, and she had a son named Bhima. After Kumbakarna's death she lived alone with her son on a mountain. When Bhima asked who his father was and why they were staying on that mountain in solitude, his mother told him the whole sad story of how his father had been killed by Rama. Bhima swore vengeance on all the devotees of Vishnu. His first target was the king, Kamarupa, who was a great devotee of Vishnu. Bhima attacked the city and destroyed everything and threw the king and his wife into a dungeon. They then prayed to Shiva to save them. When he heard this, Bhima rushed to the dungeon with sword upraised to behead the king. At that moment Shiva jumped out of the *linga* and killed Bhima by the mere utterance of the sound "*hum*." This is the sixth *jyotirlinga,* known as Bhimashankara.

7. Visvanatha

The seventh *jyotirlinga* is known as Visvanatha and is located in the most holy city of Varanasi. Brahma himself is said to have performed *tapasya* at this spot, and it is said that Varanasi will not be destroyed even at the time of Mahapralaya, when the rest of the world goes into dissolution. Shiva is foretold to raise the city on the point of his trident and protect it while destruction rages all around.

There is another story connected with Varanasi. Once Shiva and Parvati had gone to Brahmaloka. Brahma began reciting hymns through all his five faces in praise of Shiva. But one of the mouths was making mistakes, so Shiva, who was a perfectionist where music was concerned, plucked off the head that was making mistakes. However, since this was a crime against a Brahmin, Shiva found that he could not shake off the head, which had stuck to his back. It was only when he

went to Varanasi that the head fell off, so Shiva decided to stay there in the form of a *linga*. This *linga* is called Visvanatha, or the Lord of the universe. The first humans to worship there were Swayambhu Manu and his wife Shatarupa, the first couple ever to be created by Brahma.

8. Tryambakeswara

The eighth *jyotirlinga,* known as Tryambakeswara, is situated on the banks of the Godavari River. This place is associated with the sage Gautama and his wife, Ahalya. They prayed to Shiva for a long time, and when he appeared, Gautama asked him for a boon. He begged that the Ganga would flow beside his hermitage so that he could bathe in her purifying waters and thus expiate his sin in having killed a cow by accident. Shiva granted the boon, but Ganga insisted that she would go there only if Shiva took up residence. Thus, Shiva agreed to stay there in the form of a *linga*. Ganga flowed beside him and took the name Godavari.

9. Vaidyanatha

The ninth *jyotirlinga* is known as Vaidyanatha. Ravana, king of the *rakshasas,* was a great devotee of Lord Shiva. He started practicing *tapasya* in the Himalayas. Shiva did not appear, so Ravana came down to the foothills of the Himalayas. He dug a pit and placed a *linga* inside and started doing *tapasya* there. When Shiva refused to appear, Ravana, being a *rakshasa,* decided to sacrifice his heads—of which he had ten—in the fire. He lit a fire and started throwing his heads into the flames one by one. When the ninth head had been chopped off, Shiva appeared and asked him to choose a boon, since it was fairly obvious that if he sacrificed his last head, there would be no one left to give the boon to. Ravana prayed for superhuman strength and for the restoration of his nine heads. Shiva granted this boon, for he was Vaidyanatha, the Lord of healers. He also gave him a wonderful *jyotirlinga* and told him to take it straight to Lanka and never put it on the ground. Ravana started on his journey back to his capital, Lanka, carrying this radiant

linga. The gods feared that he would become invincible if he took the *linga* to his island, so they asked Ganesha to thwart him in his attempt. Ganesha took the form of a young *brahmachari* and appeared before Ravana just as he felt a terrible urge to answer the call of nature. Ravana gave the *linga* to the boy and told him to hold it until he returned. However, Ravana took such a long time that Ganesha put the *linga* down. When Ravana returned he found no trace of the *brahmachari* and try as he might, he could not budge the *linga*. It was rooted to the spot, and this *linga*, which Ravana inadvertently installed, is known as Vaidyanatha.

10. Nagesha

The tenth *jyotirlinga* is known as Nagesha. There was once a merchant called Supriya, a great devotee of Lord Shiva. He had to travel through a forest that was owned by a *rakshasi* named Daruka, who harassed him constantly. Supriya begged Shiva to help him, so Shiva came with his serpents, the *nagas,* and drove Daruka away. Daruka then appealed to Parvati, who gave her a dense forest of her own where she could reside peacefully without troubling anybody. The *linga* worshipped by Supriya is known as Nageshvara, Lord of serpents, and Parvati's name here is Nageshwari.

11. Rameshwara

The eleventh *jyotirlinga* is in the south of India and is known as Rameshwara. In Lord Vishnu's incarnation as Rama, Ravana the demon king had abducted his wife Sita and taken her to his island fortress off the coast of India, known as Lanka. Rama built a bridge to cross the straits that separated India from Lanka, but before he crossed, he made a *linga* of Shiva and worshipped it. Shiva appeared and blessed him with all success, and Rama asked Shiva to remain there forever. This *linga* on the banks of the ocean is known as Rameshwara, and it is one of the most famous places of worship in India.

12. Ghushnesha

The twelfth and last of the *jyotirlingas* is known as Ghushnesha. A very charming story is connected with this *linga*. Once there was a Brahmin named Sudharma, who had a wife called Sudeha. They were very unhappy because they had no children, so Sudharma decided to conduct an experiment to find out if they were fated to have a son. He plucked two flowers and mentally associated one with a son. He asked his wife to choose one flower. Unfortunately she chose the other one, so Sudharma concluded that he was indeed not fated to beget a son. Sudeha felt very unhappy at this and begged her husband to marry her niece, Ghushna, in order to have a son. At his wife's insistence, Sudharma married Ghushna, who was a great devotee of Lord Shiva. In order to get a son she took a vow that she would make 101 *lingas* out of clay every day and worship them. At the end of the daily *puja* she would immerse the *lingas* in the pond nearby. When she completed the worship of one *lakh* of *lingas,* she conceived and gave birth to a lovely baby boy. As might be expected, the first wife's nature changed as soon as the child was born, and she began to be very jealous of Ghushna. One night she killed the baby and threw the corpse into the pond where the *lingas* had been immersed.

The next morning, Ghushna got up as usual and started to prepare for her daily worship of Shiva. In the meantime her husband found out that the baby had disappeared, but Ghushna was not distracted by this and continued with her *puja* of the *linga*. Shiva was impressed by her devotion and restored the baby to her. As Shiva raised his trident in order to kill Sudeha, Ghushna, who had a most forgiving nature, begged him to spare the life of her aunt. Shiva was very pleased by her generous and forgiving nature and offered her a boon. She begged that Shiva would always be present in the *linga* near the pond, which she worshipped daily. He granted this boon, and this *linga* is known as Ghushnesha.

Devotees of Shiva consider it a rare good fortune to be able to make a pilgrimage to all twelve of the *jyotirlingas.*

Lord Shiva is called Bhuteswara, or Lord of the elements. There are five temples to Shiva in Tamil Nadu, South India, which correspond to these five elements. The five elements are *akasha,* or ether; *vayu,* or air; *tejas,* or fire; *apas,* or water; and *prithvi,* or earth. The *akasha-linga* is found in Chidambaram, the *vayu-linga* at Sri Kalahasti, the *tejo-linga* at Arunachalam in Tiruvannamalai, the *apas-linga* at Jambukeshwara in Tiruchirapalli, and the *prithvi-linga* at Ekambaranath at Kanchipuram.

Prostrations to the one who is the eldest and the youngest. Prostrations to the primordial cause and the subsequent effect. Prostrations to the eternal youth who is also the infant. Prostrations to the one who is in the loins and in the seed. Prostrations to the one who is present in vice and virtue!

"Sri Rudrum," *Yajur Veda*

There are three things that are rare indeed in this world: birth in the human body, desire for liberation, and the care of a perfect master.

Having by some means obtained a human birth and a male body and mastery over the Vedas, the foolish person who does not strive for liberation verily commits suicide. He kills himself by clinging to things that are unreal.

Katha Upanishad

Aum Namashivaya!

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Aum Sookshmathanaye Namaha!

PART TWO

Those Who Worship Shiva

The Perennial Philosophy is primarily concerned with the one divine Reality substantial to the manifold world of things and lives and minds. But the nature of this one Reality is such that it cannot be directly and immediately apprehended except by those who have chosen to fulfill certain conditions, making themselves loving, pure in heart, and pure in spirit. . . . But in every age there have been some men and women who have chosen to fulfill the conditions upon which alone, as a matter of brute empirical fact, such immediate knowledge can be had. And of these, a few have left accounts of the reality they were thus able to apprehend, and have tried to relate in one comprehensive system of thought the given facts of this experience with the given facts of their other experiences. To such first-hand exponents of the Perennial Philosophy those who knew them have generally given the name of "saint" or "prophet," "sage" or "enlightened one."

Aldous Huxley

The devotees of Shiva who are described here belong to this class of beings.

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Aum Jagatgurave Namaha!

25

Devotees of Shiva

O mouth of mine, note that you praise the Lord,
Who, donning the hide of the rutting elephant,
Dances in the cremation ground,
Where dwell the ghouls.
O mouth of mine, note that you praise Him!

Saint Appar

No story of Shiva can be complete without mention of the great Shaivite devotees of Southern India, who were known as Nayanmars. References to Shiva and his worship are extant even in the earliest Tamil literature, but the theology was systematized only in the late thirteenth century by Meykanda Deva in his *Shiva-jnana-bodham;* this became the basic text of the Shaive Siddhanta philosophy, which considers Shiva to be the supreme deity. The golden age of Shaivism dawned at the time of the sixty-three canonical saints, called the Nayanmars, or Adiyars. They pointed out the perfect way of devotion to Shiva, the Supreme Lord. The Periya Puranam of Sekkizhaar is a literary masterpiece dealing with the lives, deeds, and sayings of these devotees of Lord Shiva. It was composed in the eleventh century AD.

In the spiritual history of the world it would be difficult to find

such matchless devotion to God as evinced by these sixty-three saints. Since we cannot deal with all of them, we will touch upon the lives of some of the greatest. Of these, four are without parallel. They are popularly known as Appar, Sambandar, Sundarar, and Manikkavachagar. Three of them were really child saints, but within the short period of time allocated to them, they performed miracles of piety. Sambandar died at the age of sixteen, Sundarar when he was eighteen, and Appar when he was past eighty. But these facts mean nothing. All of them were infinities scooped out of infinity, and their names are hallowed for all eternity.

Although these four belonged to the Brahmin caste, many of the Nayanmars did not belong to the upper castes. They hailed from various castes and communities, rich and poor, high and low. One was a hunter who killed a boar and roasted the carcass and not only ate it but also offered it as a fitting food for Shiva, the Lord of his heart. Another was a fisherman. A third was an untouchable who belonged to a community whose staple diet was the flesh of dead cows. None of them had the type of life one would expect of a saint. Most of them had no learning or pedigree. All they had in common was an uncommon love of God. The lives of these saints are examples to us of how devotion to the Supreme alone can emancipate the human being from the coils of karma. By the purity of their love, the childlike innocence of their faith, and their firm will to attain the object of their devotion, they were able to bind the boundless one, like the *gopis* of Vrindavana did to Lord Krishna. How we understand the stories of these saints depends on the mind-set of the reader. If perused with faith and devotion, these stories will help to elevate our own lives to a high degree.

In the history of the human race we find that along with the biological evolution of mankind, a cultural and spiritual evolution simultaneously occurred. This took place mainly by devotees imbibing the ideas, codes, and conduct of the saints. India has produced many such great souls who have helped to maintain the eternal verities of the Sanatana Dharma, or the eternal religion of the Hindus. The Nayanmars belong to this category.

They understood the true nature of the world and of God, and opted for God alone. Their devotion did not stem from ignorance and fear of the unknown, but from the wisdom of those with inner sight who are established unshakably in the truth. Love of God completely removes attachment to the body. It also cuts at the root of our attachment to the world. These saints were ready to sacrifice everything, including their own bodies and those of their dear ones, if they stood as an impediment to the worship of their beloved deity, Shiva. Some of the astonishing incidents described in the lives of these saints may be difficult for the modern mind to accept. However, those whose hearts have not been clogged with materialism will be able to understand that in the realm of God-love, there can be no second to the Divine and miracles become commonplace, since God alone pulls the strings of our lives. All problems melt in the burning fire of his grace. These saints of Tamil Nadu never asked God for a favor, not even for liberation. All they prayed was to be admitted into the galaxy of devotees.

One of Sundarar's songs begins, "I am the servant of the servants of the servants of the Lord of Thillai (Shiva)." The devotee is considered as even superior to the Lord. This interesting fact is brought out in many stories, even in the Sreemad Bhagavad Mahapuranam. This is because the true devotee is one who has been able to subjugate the divine through the intense power of his devotion. It is easier for us to worship such a devotee and receive his blessing so that we may accomplish the same feat.

All sixty-three saints of the Periya Puranam were ascetics, but not of the usual order. What these saints renounced was not their kith and kin, or their villages and houses, or their occupations. What they gave up was anger, theft, violence, pride, hurting others, attachment, and desire. What they donned was not the external clothing of the ochre robe but the internal habits of nonviolence, endurance, truth, and austerity. Externally they seemed to be no different from their neighbors, but in their hearts they were ascetics. According to the popular notion of how saints should behave, none of them appear to have done any-

thing spectacular that would have qualified them to gain *mukti*, or liberation, but the fact is that all of them did gain it. The trap that every one of these saints laid for God was the trap of love. Maybe this type of love is not developed in a day or even in a lifetime. It may need lifetimes before one can develop the type of love that makes a prisoner of God in one's heart.

Manikkavachagar sang, "Behold God who falls into the net called love."

Though this type of love, or *bhakti* as it is called, might be difficult to achieve, it is the one thing all human beings can acquire, without exception of sex, caste, creed, language, nationality, profession, poverty, or wealth. No externalities can stand in the way of a human being acquiring this one qualification, by which one can imprison the Divinity in one's own heart. It is a love without reservations—a total love, a love that does not try to possess or be possessed. It is a love that alone is worthy of merging in the very source of love, which is God. The separate entity known as the individual disappears, and what is left is God and God alone—*Shivoham, Shivoham*. The devotee melts into the arms of the Divine Beloved and nothing is left of the separate ego. The message of all these saints was simple: "Give up all attachments and love God alone, serve him in all humanity, and liberation is yours."

Shiva himself is supposed to have said of his devotees, "Shortcomings, they have none!"

Let us find out how this *bhakti* was evinced by the different saints. Did they follow the same standard or was there any variation in their devotion? Seven of them followed the accepted mode of conduct and sang their way to liberation. Nine persisted in their worship despite the difficulties of old age and poverty. Seventeen performed righteous acts of violence; they gave up their lives rather than their worship. One gouged out his own eye and placed it on the profusely bleeding eye of an idol of Shiva. Another was prepared to sacrifice his only son to Shiva, who came in the guise of a devotee. One rubbed his elbow on a stone in place of a piece of sandalwood

and used it in the worship of the Lord. Another flung a stone instead of a flower at a *linga* of Shiva every day, on his way to take his food. One rewarded a thief for stealing rice from the public granary in order to feed the devotees of the Lord. One regularly prostrated at the feet of a washerman whose body was covered with earth, who reminded him of the body of Lord Shiva, covered with ashes. Some chanted the Rudri—the garland of hymns to Shiva. Some chanted the five-syllabled *mantra* of Shiva constantly. Some took the vow of feeding the devotees of Lord Shiva through days of plenty and poverty before partaking of any food themselves. Thus we see that the criteria for *mukti* ranged from the sublime to the ridiculous, and from the heroic to the mundane. The truth that emerges from this is that the Lord does not look into the act, but the love behind the act. Lord Krishna accepted the sweat-soaked bundle of rice flakes from his poverty-stricken friend Kuchela and showered him with all the riches of Dwaraka. So also Lord Shiva did not notice how ridiculous some of the acts of his devotees were, but looked into their hearts overflowing with love.

> *Prostrations to the one who is present in death and liberation. Prostrations to the one who is present in the green fields and the barnyards. Prostrations to the one who is present in the Vedic* mantras *and the Upanishads. Prostrations to the one present in trees and creepers. Prostrations to the one who is both sound and echo!*
>
> "Sri Rudrum," *Yajur Veda*

> *Prostrations to the one present in marshes and ponds.*
> *Prostrations to the one present in rivers and lakes.*
> *Prostrations to the one present in wells and pits.*

Prostrations to the one present in rains and drought.
Prostrations to the one present in thunder and lightning.

"Sri Rudrum," *Yajur Veda*

Aum Namashivaya!

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Aum Devaya Namaha!

26
The Great Four

He grabbed me lest I go astray,
Wax before an unspent fire,
Mind melted, body trembled,
I bowed, I wept, I cried out loud,
I danced and praised Him.

Saint Manikkavachagar

The four great saints, or Nayanmars, whose lives are given below are known in Tamil literature as the "Fathers of the Faith." Each of them followed a different path in his approach to God. They are popularly known as Sundarar, Appar, Sambandar, and Manikkavachagar. Sundarar followed the *sakhya marga,* or path of friendship. Appar followed the *dasa marga,* or path of the servant. Sambandar followed the *satputra marga,* or path of the good son, and Manikkavachagar followed the *jnana marga,* or path of knowledge.

THE FRIEND OF SHIVA

The life of Sundaramurthi Nayanar, who lived in the eighth century, shows us how one can lead a householder's life and still be an ardent

devotee of God. It also shows us that the Lord is deeply interested in all our problems. There is nothing in our lives that God considers small or petty; we are the ones who fail to approach him for what we consider to be petty household problems. This is the great lesson, that Sundarar did not hesitate to involve the Lord in every single incident of his life, even his love affairs. He lived for only eighteen years but in that short span of time he composed some of the most beautiful songs about Lord Shiva, known as *thevarams*. Shiva loved Sundarar's songs so much that he constantly tested him and made him sing to pass the test.

In his previous life Sundarar had been a servant of Lord Shiva and had lived beside him on Mount Kailasa. It was his duty to offer the Lord sacred ashes to anoint his body, and a garland of honey-laden flowers. One day it so happened that as he was plucking flowers in Parvati's garden, he fell in love with her two attendants, Kamalini and Aninditi. Knowing his desire, Lord Shiva told him to incarnate himself in the world along with the women and thus fulfill his wishes.

"You have set your mind on these damsels, therefore you will be born with them in the southern region. After consorting with them in the pleasures of love, you may come back to me." These were the words of the Lord.

Another reason why Sundarar had to take a human birth was that he had not totally exhausted all the bonds of his karma. In the theology of the Sanatana Dharma, God's grace does not take the form of absolution of all sins, even for the greatest devotee. If that were the case there would be an end to the game of life. Life is a game in which the *jivatma* (embodied soul) for some reason thinks itself to be separate from the *paramatma* and has to find its way back to its original status. The *paramatma* is our unseen companion, constantly encouraging us. The Lord stands beside the devotee and illumines him about the working of the law of *karma*. He strengthens his will to surrender totally to the will of God, thereby eradicating his desire for the fruits of *karma* and severing his link in the chain of births and deaths. The other reason for Sundarar's incarnation was that the Lord wished him

to compose divine music that would be an inspiration for all those in the world. He was thus born into a noble Brahmin family.

The king of the land saw the beautiful child and adopted him. At the age of fourteen he wanted to get him married, but to the great consternation of all concerned, an old Brahmin with ashes on his body and a garland of *rudraksha* beads round his neck stormed into the wedding hall and declared that the boy was his bonded slave and had no right to marry without his permission. He took Sundarar to his own town and before an assembly of elders he produced a document that proved that the boy was indeed his slave. Having thus established his rights over the boy, the old Brahmin entered the temple of Shiva and vanished, at which point Sundarar realized that this was none other than the Lord himself. Later the Lord appeared to him in a dream and ordered him to compose songs about him. From that day on, Sundarar wandered from temple to temple singing the praises of the Lord. At the temple of Tiruvarur, a heavenly voice told him, "Sundarar, I have made you my friend. From now on you will be a bridegroom for the rest of your days on earth."

Parvati's attendant, Kamalini, with whom Sundarar had fallen in love, had been born as a beautiful woman named Paravayar. They met at the temple of Tiruvarur and fell in love. Lord Shiva, who had halted Sundarar's previous attempt at marriage, now became his marriage broker and arranged for the two to be wedded the very next day after their first meeting.

Together they helped their people by interceding with Lord Shiva. One time when their town was afflicted by famine, Sundarar begged the Lord to appease the hunger of the people and miraculously, heaps of grain were found in the village. Paravayar was in the habit of distributing money to the poor on the festival of Holi and requested her husband to give her the necessary funds. Without hesitation, Sundarar went to the temple of Shiva and asked him for gold. In the morning when he awakened, he found that the bricks on which he had rested his head during the night had turned into gold, so Paravayar was able to distribute as much gold as she desired.

Another time when he was traveling, Sundarar once again asked the Lord for gold to feed the needy. The Lord gave him a heap of gold coins, but Sundarar did not know how to transport it to Tiruvarur, so Shiva told him to throw the lot into the lake and collect it when he returned to Tiruvarur. Sundarar kept one gold piece back for identification. When he returned to his hometown he dove into the lake and found coins, but they were inferior in value to those that had been given to him. This was another trick of Shiva's to encourage Sundarar to sing. After Sundarar composed another divine song, the Lord changed the gold to its original value.

The other woman Sundarar had loved in Kailasa, Aninditi, had been born as a great devotee of Lord Shiva and was called Sangiliyar. She refused to marry the man of her father's choice and took up her residence in an *ashrama,* where she made garlands daily and took them to the Lord in the nearby temple. On one of these temple visits Sundarar saw her, and due to their past association, he fell in love with her. With the familiarity of an intimate relationship he asked Lord Shiva to solve his problem, since he had heard that Sangiliyar was celibate. Shiva spoke to Sangiliyar in a dream and told her to marry Sundarar. She was willing, but when she knew that Sundarar was already married she made him promise not to desert her under any circumstance. Lord Shiva told her to make him take this oath under a nearby tree and not in the temple. Sundarar did as he was told, and they married. When spring came, Sundarar remembered how his first wife would be singing and dancing before the Lord in the temple of Tiruvarur, and was filled with a desire to see her again. For a long time he refrained, remembering his promise to Sangiliyar, but at last he could not help himself and left without a word to Sangiliyar. Just as he crossed the border of the town, he lost his eyesight and fell to the ground. Sundarar realized that the Lord was teaching him a lesson since he had broken his promise to his wife. He burst into song and with his devotional fervor unabated, and went from temple to temple begging the Lord to restore his eyesight. He knew the Lord had tricked him into making

the promise outside the temple near a tree, and with the intimacy born of close friendship, he pestered the Lord to forgive him and give him back his eyesight. At the temple of Kamakshi, goddess of the beautiful eyes, in Kanchipuram, Parvati, who knew his distress, restored the sight of one eye. He was delighted and composed many songs to her. Before he reached Tiruvarur, he begged the Lord once more to restore his vision. Shiva asked him to go and bathe in the temple tank, or reservoir. When he emerged he was the color of gold.

But Sundarar was not satisfied with this and begged the Lord to give him both eyes so that he could feast them once more on the vision of the Lord in the temple. At last Shiva relented and gave him back his eyesight.

In the meantime Paravayar had heard of Sundarar's bigamous behavior and refused to allow him into her house. Once again Sundarar approached his one and only friend, Shiva, to help him in this new predicament. Shiva went as a Brahmin to Paravayar's house and pleaded Sundarar's case. At first she refused since she did not recognize him, but when Shiva showed her his real form, she fell at his feet and happily agreed to take Sundarar back. Thus the two were reunited.

There are many stories about how the Lord saved Sundarar from every predicament and granted his every request. But each time, before granting his desire, Shiva would ask him to sing for him. It is said that on three occasions, Lord Shiva himself suggested the first line for his song. Once when Sundarar was struggling with the first line, Shiva prompted him, "O Thou who are difficult of being experienced in the mind and of being expressed in words."

On the second occasion, when Sundarar could not decide on a suitable word to begin his sonnet, Lord Shiva suggested with a smile, "What is the difficulty about this? You once called me *pitthan* (madman) when I came to rescue you from the marriage hall, so why not start your stanza with that word."

The third time the Lord told him to start with the famous words, "I am the servant of the servants of the servants of the Lord dwelling at Thillai."

Sundarar thus joined the galaxy of the servitors of the Lord and became a *jivan mukta,* or one who was liberated even while living in the human body.

The Lord treated Sundarar as his friend. This is known as the *sakhya marga.* The greatness of this path is that the Lord tolerates all the familiarities presumed by the devotee. As the great poet Thiruvalluvar wrote, "If you ask what intimate friendship is, it is that which does not object to the liberties taken by a friend."

One day when Sundarar was praying at the temple, the sight of the idol made him crazy with longing to return to Kailasa. He rolled on the ground with sorrow and begged the Lord to take him back to his abode. He sang one of his most plaintive melodies. He was only eighteen at that time, but in his short span of time on this earth, he had composed some of the most heartrending songs to the Lord, which are sung even today in all Shiva temples. The Lord was equally anxious to have him back in Kailasa and ordered the divine white elephant to go and bring him. His physical body was discarded then and there, and those who happened to look at the sky saw Sundarar mounted on the white elephant sailing across the sky to Kailasa. His two wives also shed their mortal coils and returned to their divine abode.

THE SON OF SHIVA

Another Nayanar who wrote a collection of *thevaram* songs to Lord Shiva is Tiru Jnana Sambandar. He is called the Son of God, an Iswarakoti, or *avatara*—divine incarnations who can liberate themselves whenever they choose. Sambandar's departure from the earth at a very young age of sixteen and all the miracles he performed in his short life prove that he was indeed an *avatara,* God descended to the earth in the form of a man. At the time of his birth, Jainism was becoming popular in Tamil Nadu, and Sambandar's parents had prayed for a son who would bring the land back to its original Vedic beliefs.

Once at the age of three, Sambandar was left on the banks of a lake

while his father went in for a bath. The child, who was filled with love and desire to see his true father, began to cry piteously as he looked up at the heavens. Lord Shiva sent Parvati to comfort him. She came and fed him from her own breasts. When his earthly father returned, he found the child drooling milk and wondered who had fed him. The child stood with one foot raised like a statue of Shiva, and pointing one finger to the heavens, he sang his immortal song, "Behold Him with an earplug of a rolled palmyra leaf!" Obviously he had the beatific vision of Lord Shiva at that time and began his ministry even at that tender age. At an age when many children cannot lisp more than a few words, Sambandar sang this song of eleven stanzas conforming to the rigid rules of Sanskrit grammar, set to an ancient Tamil melody. No doubt this was due to the milk imbibed from the breasts of Parvati, the Divine Mother of all arts.

Like Sundarar, he also went from temple to temple singing songs in praise of the Lord, which melted the hearts of all who heard him. The Lord is supposed to have presented him with a pair of gold cymbals to keep time.

At his sacred investiture ceremony at the age of seven, well before he'd had any formal education, he astonished the priests by standing up and reciting all the Vedas. He taught the priests that the *panchakshari mantra* of Lord Shiva, "Namashivaya," contained all the Vedas, and that this alone was his source of knowledge.

Since he had so little time to accomplish all that he had come to do, he was carried on his father's shoulder from place to place, from the age of three onward. At many of the temples he visited, he performed miracles and alleviated the troubles of the devotees. Once the wife of a devotee died of snakebite, and it is said that Sambandar revived her with one of his songs. At this time the Jain influence was growing all over Tamil Nadu, and in the city of Madurai, even the king had been converted. Only the queen and the chief minister were ardent Shiva *bhaktas*. When she heard of the child-saint, the queen sent the minister and begged him to come to the city. The Jain monks were perturbed

at the minister's coming and decided to set fire to his camp using black magic, but they were unable to do so, and the fire, which had been sanctioned by the king, traced its path back to him. He was seized with a dreadful burning sensation all over his body. The queen urged him to call Sambandar. The Jain monks came, along with the child-saint, and challenged him to demonstrate his powers. The king promised to accept Sambandar's faith if he could cure him. The monks told him to cure the right side while they attempted to cure the left. The monks chanted *mantras* and passed peacock feathers over the king's left side, but the burning continued unabated. Sambandar sang a song in praise of the sacred ashes of Lord Shiva and smeared the king's right side with ash, and immediately the king was free of the disease. He begged him to do the same for his left side, and this was done with the same result. The king and his consort fell at his feet. But the stubborn Jains insisted on more tests. They ordered him to throw the leaves of his song into the fire. Both parties threw their respective palm leaves into the flames, and the leaves of the Jains were burned to cinders. They insisted that both sets of leaves should be thrown into the river, and that which floated against the current should be considered superior. Sambandar was victorious in this test also, and the whole land was converted back to Shaivism.

After undertaking a number of pilgrimages, Sambandar returned to his hometown at the age of sixteen. His father wanted to see him married.

Sambandar agreed and participated with secret amusement in the wedding ceremony. It is to be noted that Sambandar sang of the glory of the *panchakshari mantra* for the first time during his investiture ceremony and for the last time at his wedding ceremony, dressed gorgeously as a bridegroom. As he went around the ceremonial fire with his finger entwined in the little finger of his child bride, the fire grew into effulgence and engulfed him, along with his bride. The wedding guests were also consumed by this effulgence and reached the abode of Lord Shiva. In his brief lifetime Sambandar did as much for Shaivism

as Adi Shankara did for Advaita. Through his thousands of songs, he rekindled religious faith and ancient modes of worship in the heart of his people.

THE SERVANT OF SHIVA

Saint Appar's role was to be a forerunner to the son of God—Sambandar—just as Kumarila Bhatta was to Adi Shankaracharya, and John the Baptist to Christ. His life revolved round the life of Sambandar. He lived at the same time as Sambandar, even though the historic meeting between the two of them took place only when Appar was in his fifties and Sambandar but a boy of seven. At that time Jainism had taken strong hold over the people of Tamil Nadu, and Appar decided that he should learn more about the religion so that he could help Sambandar in his mission. He went to Pataliputra and entered the Jain monastery in order to study its precepts. He was branded as a defector from the true faith, but the fact was that Appar was a mystic who knew of the coming of Sambandar and the purpose for which he was coming. He understood that he would have to learn something of Jainism if he wanted to be able to help Sambandar, whom he knew would live for only sixteen years.

For twenty years Appar lived as a Jain monk, but when Sambandar was seven years old, Appar knew that the time had come for him to leave the monastery and go to his aid. He was wondering how he could leave the monastery without antagonizing the Jains, when Shiva came to his aid by giving him a severe colic that the Jains could not cure. He went to his sister, who cured him by using the five-syllabled, *panchakshari mantra* of Shiva.

Appar himself sang thus, "O Lord, who roams about receiving alms in a dry skull, do graciously rid me of the colic that is inside my body."

At this time the king of the region had become a Jain, and the Jain monks compelled him to kill Appar, since he had defected from their order. They imprisoned him in a burning kiln of limestone. When they

opened the kiln after seven days they found Appar alive and in deep *samadhi*. They attributed it to the *mantras* he had learned from them and gave him poison. Appar repeated the *panchakshari mantra* and drank the poison as if it were the elixir of life, and he survived.

Then they put him in the way of a rampaging elephant. When Appar faced him with a beautiful verse on Shiva, the elephant bowed before him and turned its fury on the monks. Lastly, they tied a granite stone round his neck and flung him into the sea. The stone started to float as Appar began to sing, "He is the Word, He is the savior, He is the Veda incarnate, He is the effulgence . . ." He ended with the words, "The name of the Lord is nothing but Namashivaya."

The amorphous state of the Godhead as represented by the *linga* is Nada, or sound, which is the word "Namashivaya." The stone carried him to the shore, and as he walked into the town, his form was brilliant with ashes on his body and *rudraksha* beads round his neck.

However, even the orthodox Shaivites were angry with him, for they thought he was a traitor and boycotted him, so he decided that it was better to leave the town and go and meet Sambandar. At the historic meeting, the great ones recognized each other. Without a moment's hesitation they prostrated at each other's feet, since each was aware of the other's greatness. Appar recognized in the child the savior of Shaivism and stayed several days with Sambandar.

At their second meeting, a famine was raging in the land, and both of them prayed to Shiva to end the suffering of the people. The Lord promised to give them one gold coin daily to buy food for the people. Daily they would find a gold coin at the eastern and western entrances of the temple and used it to buy food for the poor. After this, they traveled together for some time, visiting shrines and performing many miracles.

Their third and last meeting was when Sambandar was returning from Madurai after having defeated the Jains. Appar saw the procession approaching, and with the humility of a true saint, he quietly helped to carry the palanquin in which Sambandar was seated. When

Sambandar saw him, he jumped out of the palanquin and embraced him with the greatest of love. They stayed together for some time and parted, never to meet again.

It was at the temple of Tiruppunthuruthi that Appar sang his famous song, "O head of mine bow down to the Head of the universe . . ." in which he commanded every limb of his body to worship Lord Shiva.

Once while Appar was digging in the temple gardens, Lord Shiva tested him. Gems and gold came up with the dirt. Appar dug them out with his spade and flung them, along with the dirt, into a lake filled with lotuses. Then heavenly damsels descended on him and tempted him with their alluring charms, but he was totally unmoved by them and was intent on his repetition of the five-syllabled *mantra.*

He sang, "Thinker that I am, what should I think of, but of the holy feet of the Lord . . . I see nothing but Thy anklet-girded feet. . . . Here and now O virtuous One, I am coming to Thy feet." So saying, Appar abandoned his body at the age of eighty-one. His motto was "humble service," and he always carried a hoe, which he used to work in all the temple gardens.

THE KNOWER OF SHIVA

Manikkavachagar was born to Brahmin parents. Even as a child he was so bright that the king of the land made him his prime minister. But very soon the youth realized the ephemeral nature of the world and decided to seek his guru. At that time the cavalry was becoming depleted and the king ordered his prime minister to go and secure horses. Manikkavachagar was delighted and took this as an opportunity to find his guru. When he reached a temple, he found a Brahmin seated beneath a tree holding the book, *Shiva Jnana Bodham* (The knowledge of Shiva). As soon as he saw him, Manikkavachagar realized that this was, indeed, his guru. He ran forward and prostrated at his feet and begged him to accept him as his disciple. The Lord himself had come in the form of

a Brahmin in order to initiate Manikkavachagar into the mysteries of the knowledge of Shiva. Manikkavachagar immediately surrendered all his wealth to his guru and sang a melodious song to him. This was the garland of jewels he offered to his guru, and thus Lord Shiva called him Manikkavachagar, since his words were like gems. Soon after, the Brahmin vanished and Manikkavachagar realized that this was none other than Lord Shiva. He was filled with sorrow at the disappearance of his guru and forgot the mission for which he had come. Moreover, all the money meant for the horses had been surrendered at the feet of the guru, who had given it for the reconstruction of the temple. He sent word to the king that he would come within a month.

The month went by, and the angry king sent another message. Manikkavachagar reported the matter to the Lord in the temple. Shiva came in a dream and told him to return to the king, and he himself would bring the horses. Manikkavachagar returned and told the king that he had already arranged for the horses, and they would be brought to the palace on an auspicious date. In the meantime, the other ministers reported to the king all that had actually occurred in the temple and that Manikkavachagar had given to his guru the money meant for the horses. The king was furious and ordered him to be tortured.

Manikkavachagar bore the agony patiently for he was sure that the Lord would keep his promise. Seeing his devotee being tormented, Lord Shiva changed all the jackals in the nearby forest into horses and sent his own messengers as riders. He himself took the form of a horse trader, and they reached the city of Madurai on an auspicious day, as promised. When the king saw the horses, he felt very sorry for having inflicted this unnecessary punishment on his prime minister and apologized profusely.

As soon as he saw the horse trader, Manikkavachagar realized that he was none other than Lord Shiva and prostrated to him. The horses were led to the stables. However, with his usual puckish humor, Shiva decreed that during the night the horses would regain their previous forms, and they fled howling to the forest.

The king was furious with Manikkavachagar and ordered that he should be caught and tortured once again, since he felt that Manikkavachagar had made a fool of him once more. The saint prayed to the Lord to help him, and immediately the river next to the town began to rise. There was panic in the city, the soldiers fled, and Manikkavachagar went to the temple and prayed for help. In the meantime the king ordered everyone in the city to go and help in the construction of an embankment to stop the floodwaters from rising further. There was an old woman in the town who was unable to carry anything, and she prayed to the Lord to help her. Shiva came in the form of a laborer and started to throw mud at the breach with such force that it opened again. The king, who happened to be there at that time, was furious when he saw this. Taking a stout stick he beat the man on his head. Everyone in the world, including the king, felt these blows. It was only then that the king realized this was all a play of the Lord. An invisible voice told him to go and beg Manikkavachagar's pardon for all the injustice done to him. The king ran to the saint, apologized profusely, and begged him to accept the rulership of the country. Manikkavachagar refused and took leave of the king once and for all. He had had enough of politics and realized that he had come to this earth for a higher purpose. All he wanted was to meet his guru once again. He wended his way through all the temples of South India, in the hope of seeing the Lord once more in the form of his guru. In order to please him, Lord Shiva appeared to him in the form of his guru at every shrine. At last he reached the glorious temple of Chidambaram, where Shiva is in the form of Nataraja. This is the place where he composed his famous song called the "Tiruvachagam."

At that time a Buddhist monk from Sri Lanka, accompanied by the Sri Lankan king and his mute daughter, came to Chidambaram to inquire about the existence of a god other than the Buddha. The king of the land decided to arrange a debate between the Buddhist and a Shaivite. Manikkavachagar was chosen to represent Shaivism, since he

was the one who was most knowledgeable. At the end of the debate, the Buddhist monks were literally struck dumb.

The Sri Lankan king was amazed and said to Manikkavachagar, "You have made my eloquent teachers mute. Now if you are able to make my mute daughter speak, we will all renounce our faith and join yours." Manikkavachagar requested the Lord to help him, and the mute girl started to speak fluently and to faultlessly refute the arguments of the Buddhist monks. Needless to say, the king was converted.

One day Lord Shiva came to Manikkavachagar in the form of a Brahmin and asked him to sing "Tiruvachagam" for him. The Lord proceeded to write down the song on palm leaves as Manikkavachagar sang. Manikkavachagar was so overwhelmed by the Lord's love and grace that tears started rolling from his eyes, and he prostrated himself on the temple steps and could not rise. When the temple priests came they found the palm leaves written by the Lord on the steps of the temple, and Manikkavachagar in a state of ecstasy. Of the Brahmin there was no sign. The temple priests approached Manikkavachagar and asked him to explain the meaning of what was written on the leaves and who had written them. With trembling hands, Manikkavachagar pointed to the idol within the temple and said, "He alone is the subject matter of these songs. He alone has written them!" He was so overcome with emotion as he uttered these words that he could not rise from the feet of Lord Nataraja. He literally merged into the idol of the Lord and was never seen again.

O hands of mine! Join together
And worship that transcendent Being,
Who has a snake with the poisonous mouth as a
waistband.
Strewn at His feet are fragrant flowers. O hands of
mine!
Join together and worship Him.

Saint Appar

Words cannot express that state; the mind cannot grasp it,
The senses cannot perceive it
Except through firm belief in God and Self,
It cannot be understood.

"Yoga Vasishta" by Sage Vasishta

Aum Namashivaya!

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Aum Anaghaya Namaha!

27
The Violent Votaries

His birth was in a family of hunters
Who robbed honeycombs and ate flesh.
He roamed about the forest in the mountains, where
roamed the tiger.
He bred red-eyed dogs and decoy animals.
He wielded the cruel bow, the spear, the sword,
And dwelt with butchered carcasses.
His form, a brawny forearm chewed by a tiger.
A rock-like chest hacked with mighty weapons, face
marked by the teeth of bears.
Thigh slashed by the sharp-tusked boar.
Dense upstanding tuft, bloodshot, terrifying eyes,
Resounding harsh speech!

Saint Nakeera

This was written about Kannappa Nayanar, who was one of the earliest of the saints. He was a brutish creature, born the son of a brutish chieftain of an aboriginal tribe, living in brutish terrain. It is said that he was the incarnation of Arjuna, who had dared to fight in the guise of a hunter with Lord Shiva; because of this he was born a hunter.

On his maiden hunt, Kannappa chased and killed a boar. While his friends roasted it, he went to visit the temple at the top of the hill. When he reached the temple and saw the *linga,* a remarkable change came over him. He ran toward the *linga* in ecstasy and began to hug and kiss it, for therein he saw his beloved Lord. A simple hunter, Kannappa was totally devoid of all knowledge of ritualistic worship, but his friend told him that the method of worshipping Shiva was to pour water over the idol (*abhisheka*) and then offer flowers and food. Though he was loath to leave his beloved alone, he sped off and took the best portions of the pork that had been roasted, and after tasting each piece to see if it was nicely done, he laid the pieces lovingly on a bed of leaves. Then he ran to the river and took some water in his mouth since he had no vessel, and gathered some flowers and kept them in his hair since he had no basket, and rushed back to the temple. He spat the water in his mouth over the idol as *abhisheka* and brushed aside the flowers in his hair with his sandals so that they fell over the *linga*. He then placed the pork on its bed of leaves in front of the *linga* and said, "Here is meat that I have roasted to a turn and tasted with my experienced tongue. Pray be gracious enough to eat it." He waited anxiously, never taking his eyes off the idol, like a mother watching her beloved child. When the sun set, his friends did their best to make him go back home, but he refused to budge from the side of the idol.

The next day while Kannappa was hunting, a Brahmin priest who came for daily worship of the deity arrived and was horrified to see the desecration of the temple. He noticed the imprint of sandals and the pug marks of dogs inside the sanctum sanctorum and the strange flowers on the idol, and the stench of meat everywhere. He performed the necessary purificatory rites. He then brought water in a copper vessel for the Lord's bath with a cloth tied round his mouth, lest his breath pollute the water. He brought flowers in a rush basket and made a delightful concoction of milk and rice for the offering, untasted by anyone. After finishing the ritual he returned home.

Kannappa came back soon after and disturbed everything that the

priest had done and performed the rites in his own unorthodox fashion. This went on for five days, much to the chagrin of the priest. On the fifth night the Lord appeared in a dream to the priest and told him to hide himself if he wanted to see something special. The priest hid himself behind the *linga*. On the sixth day when Kannappa returned with his hoard of fresh meat he saw a dreadful sight. A stream of blood was gushing out of the right eye of the Lord in the *linga*. Kannappa ran forward and tried to stem the flow, but it continued unabated. He found some herbs and applied them to the bleeding eye but without any effect. At last he had a brilliant idea. He gouged out his own eye with the tip of his arrow and placed it lovingly over the bleeding eye and stanched the wound, but immediately the other eye also began to bleed. This time Kannappa knew exactly what to do, but the problem would be finding the exact spot of the eye on the idol, without his second eye. Then he thought of a splendid idea. He placed his left foot on the bleeding eye to mark the place and put his arrow to his remaining eye.

The Lord could bear this no longer. He jumped out of the *linga* and caught Kannappa's hand and said, "Stop, Kannappa!"

Three times he cried thus, and Kannappa was thrice blessed. From that day onward he was known as Kannappa. His sacrifice was equivalent to the one made by Vishnu, the lotus-eyed one who had given his own eye to the three-eyed Lord. Unparalleled was Kannappa's love, and to this day, poets sing his glory.

Arivattayar Nayanar was a great devotee of Lord Shiva. Daily he offered cooked red rice, red spinach, and some mango pickle to the Lord. To test him, Lord Shiva took away all his wealth, but Arivattayar worked in someone else's field and with the wages that he received there, he continued to offer the same things to the Lord. He and his family ate inferior rice and offered the best quality to Shiva. But a time came when only red rice was available, so Arivattayar ate only the greens from his garden and not the rice, which was offered to Shiva. One day

as he was carrying his usual offering to the temple, his legs faltered due to weakness, and he fell on the ground, spilling the food.

He began to weep bitterly and said, "O Lord, if it is true that you are omnipresent, you must be here on this spot, right now. Pray accept my offering, which has fallen on the ground. If you do not eat it I will give up my life."

With these words he took up a sickle and started to hack his throat. Just then he heard the crunching sound of someone biting into the mango pickle. Simultaneously the holy hand stretched forth and caught the sickle and prevented him from killing himself.

Murthi Nayanar used to adore the idol of Shiva by anointing it daily with sandalwood paste. A time came when a Jain king ruled the land and began to persecute the followers of Shiva. Murthi Nayanar continued his worship undaunted. In order to convert him, the king declared that no sandalwood should be used in the land. Murthi prayed to Lord Shiva to give them a king who would be favorable to Shiva devotees. He was fast exhausting his stock of sandalwood, and the day came when he did not have even a small piece for his daily worship. He searched the whole city without being able to find a single block of sandalwood. When the time came for his daily worship, he went to the temple and in desperation, began to rub his own elbow on the grinding stone, in lieu of sandalwood. It started bleeding profusely. Lord Shiva appeared and stopped him and told him that he had accepted his sacrifice and that he would be made king of the land. That night the cruel king died, and in accordance with their ancient custom, the ministers sent the palace elephant to choose a worthy successor. The elephant went unerringly toward the temple and, seeing Murthi Nayanar, bowed to him and returned to the palace carrying him on its back. The ministers begged Murthi to accept the kingship. He agreed, but on certain conditions. He said that he would not be anointed with perfumes but only with ashes, he would

not wear any jewels but only *rudraksha* beads, and his crown would be his matted locks. The ministers agreed. Murthi became king, and once again Shaivism flourished in the land.

Chandeswar Nayanar was a child prodigy. One day he saw a cowherd beating a cow and was so unhappy that he offered his own services to the householders who employed the cowherd. The cows prospered under the care of the child and yielded milk of their own accord. The boy used to make a mud *linga* on the riverbank and pour milk over it every day, since there was a surplus. One day his father caught him in the act and angrily kicked the *linga* that the child was worshipping. The boy looked up and saw that it was his own father who had obstructed his *puja*. He took up a stick, which turned into an axe in his hands, and chopped off his father's feet. He continued with his worship, unmindful of his father lying on the ground. The Lord appeared and blessed him for his extreme devotion that could not tolerate an insult to the *linga* and would not let any personal attachment stand in the way of his convictions.

Sakkiyar was a Shaivite who became a Buddhist monk, but he could never eradicate the ingrained love of Shiva from his heart. Even though he did not change his garb, he used to worship a *linga* on the way to his *bhiksha*—a Buddhist monk is supposed to beg for his food and this is called *bhiksha*. Every day he had to pass the *linga* on his way and would throw a stone at it as an offering to Lord Shiva. A large heap of stones grew up in this barren place as a result of his strange floral offering. He continued this unique form of worship every day. The flinging of the stone became an act charged with love, and the Lord accepted it as such. Once when he was just sitting down to eat, he remembered that he had not made his usual offering to the Lord and, leaving his food, ran back to the *linga*. Just as he flung the stone, the Lord appeared and blessed him.

Siruthonda Nayanar was a *bhakta* who never ate his meal without first feeding a devotee of Shiva. One day Shiva came to him in the guise of a *bhakta* just before his mealtime. Siruthonda was delighted and begged him to be seated. Shiva said that he had taken a vow that once in six months he would eat the meat of a five-year-old child who was the only son of his parents, and this happened to be the right time. Siruthonda realized that his son met both these requirements and agreed without a moment's hesitation. His wife agreed that it was their great good luck that they were given the opportunity to serve a devotee of Shiva in this unique fashion. The unsuspecting child was brought and kept lovingly on his mother's lap. The father chopped off his head and the meat was cooked and served to their guest. The Shiva devotee insisted that the host eat with him, so Siruthonda sat to feast on the flesh of his only son. Then their demanding guest insisted that the son of his host should also eat with them. Siruthonda stammered excuses, but the guest insisted that the wife should go out and call their son. To the astonishment of the parents, the boy came running in as soon as he was called. When they returned to the kitchen with the son, they found the place empty. Neither the mendicant nor the meat was there, and they realized that the Lord had tested them to the utmost.

The Atman is self-existent, all pervading—pure.
It is beyond the concept and range of sin.
It has no form or body and hence cannot be hurt by weapons.
The Atman in its personal or individualized aspect is God, the omniscient and all-inclusive One.
It is the inspirer of saints and seers.

It is omnipotent and is the final refuge and bestower of the fruits of actions.

The one who does not know the truth of the Atman and leads a life wedded to the senses falls into blinding darkness.
But the one who knows the truth of the Atman, yet leads a sensual life, falls into deeper darkness.

FROM *THE VEDAS* BY
CHANDRAMOULEESWARA SARASWATI

Aum Namashivaya!

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Aum Shaswathaya Namaha!

28
Women Devotees

She who, saying, 'I will not tread with my feet, the sacred mountain of the Lord,'
Walked on her hands with both her feet pointing to the sky,
Who was privileged to be hailed 'My mother' by the Lord of red-golden body,
When Uma laughed at the sight,
She is the treasure of the family of Karaikkal,
Where pure honey seeps from the boughs of trees.

Saint Nambiyandar Nambi

Punithavathi, the daughter of a rich merchant, was a devout wife. Once her husband sent two mangoes from the market with instructions to keep them for his lunch. In the meantime a visitor came for lunch, and she served one of the mangoes to him. When her husband came home, she brought the other mango and gave it to him. It was so delicious that he asked her for another. She was in a dilemma and dared not tell him the truth lest he be angry with her for having given his mango to a guest. She went and begged the Lord to help her. He gave her a mango, which she happily cut and placed before her husband. But this mango

was truly otherworldly, so the husband naturally asked her where she had gotten it. She had to tell the truth. The husband did not believe her and asked her to get another one from the same source. She went to the prayer room and begged Lord Shiva to save her from the ignominy of being called a liar. He gave her another mango. When the husband saw this miracle, he concluded that his wife must be some sort of a goddess and decided to leave her, since it would be sacrilegious to have any sexual relationship with her. He set out on a mercantile expedition and never returned to her.

When he came back, he settled in a different part of the country, married another woman, and had a daughter by her whom he decided to call Punithavathi after his first wife. Very soon the parents of the first Punithavathi heard of his whereabouts. They took their daughter to him and demanded that he take her back. As soon as he saw Punithavathi, he prostrated at her feet, a most unusual thing for a husband to do, and begged her to forgive him. He explained to the irate parents that in his eyes, Punithavathi was a goddess and he could not regard her as a wife any more. When she heard this, Punithavathi decided that all worldly ties were a bondage and the only one to whom she was really bound was Lord Shiva. She decided to go to the holy mountain of Kailasa in order to see her true Lord. When she reached the mountain she could not bear to tread the holy ground with her feet so she began to climb it on her hands. She was nothing but skin and bone by this time, and Parvati laughed when she saw this strange apparition coming up the mountain.

Lord Shiva chided Parvati and said, "Note, O Parvati! She who is coming up in this odd fashion is the mother who cherishes us." As she approached them, Shiva addressed her as "O Mother!"

In response Punithavathi cried, "O Father" and fell at his feet.

He asked her to choose any boon, and she chose to have undying love toward him. He told her to return to the world and see his *thandava* dance and sing about his glories. She did this until the end of her life, when she was taken up to his abode. She has the unique privilege

of being the only one of the devotees mentioned here who returned home after having gone to Kailasa.

Sundarar's mother, Isai-gnaaniyaar, as well as Mangayarkkarasi, the queen of Madurai who was responsible for getting Sambandar to Madurai to defeat the Jains in debate, are two other women saints who have been mentioned by Sekkizhaar in the Periya Puranam.

Thilagavathi, the sister of Appar, was a saint in her own right. Without her help the world would never have known about Appar. She was his only relative, and she was the one who raised him and saved him from an untimely death.

She had been betrothed to a warrior, but before the wedding could take place, both her parents died. Soon after, the man to whom she was engaged also died in the war. She decided to end her life when he died, but at the pleas of her younger brother, Appar, who begged her to stay alive for his sake, she desisted and parented him. When her brother decided to join the Jains she was quite devastated. She dedicated herself to Lord Shiva and spent her days in his divine service. She begged the Lord to save her young brother from the clutches of the Jains. It is said that Shiva agreed and gave Appar a severe colic pain, as we have seen, which the Jain monks could not cure. He was forced to take refuge with his sister, who cured him purely by the repetition of the five-syllabled *mantra* of Lord Shiva and by the application of sacred ash over his body. Then she told him to enter the temple of Shiva and beg his pardon. We have seen from the story of Appar what happened to him after that. Thus, his sister, who was already mother and father to him, now became his guru. She not only cured his physical disease but also gave him spiritual redemption. She was indeed a gem amongst women.

Another woman saint was the wife of a Brahmin named Neelanakkar, whose name we do not know. She accompanied her husband daily to the Shiva temple and offered worship along with him. One day while her husband was uttering the five-syllabled *mantra* with great concentration, the lady noticed that a spider had fallen on top of the *linga*. Impelled by her motherly instincts, without thinking of what she was doing, she blew off the spider. When the Brahmin saw this he was shocked. One should never blow on an idol, lest it be defiled with our spit. He shouted at her for her foolishness and declared that he would not have her in his house again. The poor woman was forced to stay the night in the temple. That night her husband had a dream in which Shiva appeared and showed him his body, which had been totally affected by the poison. The only place that was free from the effects of the poison was the place where the spider had fallen, from which it had been removed by his wife's breath. Needless to say, the stupid husband rushed to the temple and begged his wife to return home with him. Her spontaneous action had been inspired purely by maternal love, and the Lord took it as such. We have seen that Shiva had a friend, a son, and a servant, but this was the first time we heard that he, who was never born of a woman's womb, acquired a mother.

Of course, all the doings of these women pale to insignificance in comparison to the great sacrifice made by the wife of Siruthonda Nayanar. As we have seen in his story, she took her only son into her lap to make it easy for her husband to chop off his head! She also cooked and served the flesh of her child to the so-called Shiva *bhakta* without batting an eyelid. Such a sacrifice can hardly be surpassed, and she certainly deserves a prominent place in our account of women saints.

We might wonder how it is that Shiva sanctioned such apparently heartless actions by his devotees. A culture and religion perish due

to the apathy and indifference of its followers, rather than by their excesses. Shaivites have always been known for the violent way in which they expressed their intense love for Shiva, and he seems to appreciate it. The devotees of Vishnu, however, are known for their calm, peace-loving natures akin to the nature of Lord Vishnu himself. Hinduism, with its great ability to accept all natures, has no difficulty in allowing people of different types to follow the paths best suited to their temperaments. There is no fixed rule or law of conduct that is mandatory for all human beings without exception. God has no favorites! What he values above all is the *bhavana*, or the feeling with which the devotion is given.

There are many, many more saints who have been mentioned in the Periya Puranam and whose names are sung even today in Tamil Nadu. For lack of space we have touched on the lives of just a few.

We will conclude with the words of Thomas Merton: "A mystic is one who surrenders to a power of love that is greater than human. He advances toward God in a darkness that goes beyond the light of human reason and conceptual knowledge. When we speak of mysticism, we speak of an area in which man is no longer completely in command of his own life, his own mind, and his own will. Yet at the same time his surrender is to a God who is more intimate to him than his very self."

The devotee reaches a peak of realization in which she does not even want to be in control of her life. She has no separate life or mind or will. She has surrendered herself body, mind, and soul to the core of her being, which is God, and remains content that his grace and intelligence will carry her on the waves of his divine compassion to the farther shore of existence. In this path of total submission, there is no fall and no mistake, for the Master of her Being, who is also the beloved of her heart, accomplishes all.

I have neither hatred nor attachment, nor greed or infatuation. I have neither pride nor a competitive

spirit, I am not after duty, wealth, passion, or liberation. I am the essence of consciousness and bliss—Shivoham! Shivoham!

"Nirvanashtakam" by Adi Shankaracharya

Prostrations to you who are formless and manifested in diverse forms. Prostrations to you who manifest as the noble and the lowly. Prostrations to you who are in those who ride the chariots and in those who do not. Prostrations to you who are both the chariots and their owners.

"Sri Rudrum," *Yajur Veda*

Day by day, a man comes closer to death,
His youth wears away.
Transient as the ripples on a stream is the goddess of fortune.
Fickle as lightning is life itself.
O Shiva! O giver of Shelter!
Protect me who has taken refuge at Thy feet.

Adi Shankaracharya

Aum Namashivaya!

ॐ

ॐ

Aum Anantaya Namaha!

Epilogue

Prostrations to the source of bliss, earthly and heavenly. Prostrations to the auspicious one, more auspicious than anything else. Prostrations to the one present in holy rivers and in idols installed on their banks.

"Sri Rudrum," *Yajur Veda*

The Vedas are the great storehouses of philosophy, the oldest spiritual treatises known to humankind. They are the cornerstones of the Hindu philosophy and are four in number: *Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda, and Atharvana Veda*. Of these, the first three are considered more important. In this threefold classification we find that the *Yajur Veda* comes in the middle. The "Sri Rudrum," which is a hymn dedicated to Lord Shiva, comes in the center of the seven cantos of this Veda. The *panchakshari,* or five-syllabled *mantra* of Shiva, comes in the center of the "Sri Rudrum." The name Shiva comes in the center of the *panchakshari,* as can be noticed when it is written in Sanskrit. The "Sri Rudrum" is thus considered to be the eye of the Veda-Purusha, who is Lord Shiva. The five-syllabled *mantra* then becomes the pupil of this eye. The "Sri Rudrum" is chanted at all fire sacrifices, or *yajnas*. There are eleven forms of Shiva as Rudra, and at these *yajnas,* eleven priests chant the "Sri Rudrum" eleven times, invoking Lord Shiva in eleven pots of sanctified

water. Shiva is also Bhuteswara, or Lord of the elements. So the five letters of the *mantra* stand for the five elements. When the *mantra* is chanted it takes us from the gross element of earth to the subtle aspects and eventually to the Supreme Spirit, which is here known as Shiva. Hence we end our chapters with this unique *mantra,* by the chanting of which all people will be released from the cycle of births and deaths.

We will end this book on the play of Lord Shiva by initiating all readers into the mystery of the sacred *panchakshari,* the five-syllabled *mantra* of Lord Shiva: "Na-ma-shi-va-ya." It is always preceded by the *pranava mantra,* which is "aum." So the whole *mantra* reads as *Aum Namashivaya.* Those who chant this *mantra* regularly with faith and devotion to Shiva will undoubtedly be blessed by him and attain all happiness, prosperity, and liberation.

It is usual to end all *pujas,* or ritualistic worship of Shiva, with an *arati,* or waving of camphor lights. A little verse is chanted while the lights are being waved in front of the *linga* of Shiva. This book itself is a *puja* to my three-eyed Lord, Vanamali. So we will end it with the usual *arati* to Lord Shiva.

Karpoora gauram, karunavataaram, Samsarasaaram,
bhujagendrahaaram Sada vasantam, hridayaravinde,
Bhavam Bhavani sahitham namaami.

I bow to Shiva along with Parvati,
Who resides ever in the lotus of my heart,
Who is the color of camphor, who is filled with kindness,
Who is the support of the world and who wears a snake as a garland.

Yajur Veda

Hari Aum Tat Sat

ॐ

APPENDIX ONE

Method of Worshipping Lord Shiva

Now fragrant flowers, incense, lamps, materials for the bath of the Lord,
With these in hand go to a suitable place and make a seat for the Lord. Install the image therein and meditate on His form and the light that is God.
Invoke Him to descend and occupy the image.
Worship Him with great devotion,
With flower offerings, songs, and obeisance.
Perform with ardor all the religious acts.
Those who do these acts daily
Will abide by the side of the Lord.

Shivajnana Siddhiyar

APPENDIX TWO

Names of Shiva

Adi-Purusha	The first Lord
Ardhanareeswara	Half-male, half-female form of Shiva
Ashutosha	One who is easily propitiated
Bhairava	One who brandishes a blood-soaked sword
Bhava	Eternal Being, source, origin
Bhola	The simple one
Bhuteswara	Lord of the elements
Chandrachuda	He whose head is adorned with the crescent moon
Chandrashekara	He who wears the crescent moon in his hair
Dakshinamurthy	Cosmic teacher, one who faces south
Gangadhara	One who upholds the Ganga
Girisha	Lord of mountains
Guhesha	Lord of caves
Hara	One who removes the sorrows and sins of the world
Ishana	Supreme Lord of the universe
Kalakanta	Devourer of time
Kapalin	One who carries a skull

Kirata	The hunter
Krittivasa	One who wears animal hides
Kumbakarna	Brother of the demon king Ravana
Mahadeva	The great God
Mahakala	The great Destroyer
Mahayogi	The great yogi
Maheswara	The great Lord
Nageswara	Lord of serpents
Nataraja	The cosmic dancer
Natesha	King of dance
Neelakanda	The blue-throated one
Pasupati	Lord of all creatures; divine herdsman
Rudra	The fierce one
Sadashiva	Name for Shiva as given in the *Shiva Purana;* refers to Brahman
Shambho	The auspicious one who brings peace and joy
Shambunatha	One who grants prosperity and success
Shankara	One who is benevolent and confers happiness
Sharabha	Tamer of Narasimha (a fierce avatar of Vishnu)
Sharva	The cosmic archer
Shiva	The auspicious one
Somasundara	One who is as beautiful as the moon
Somnatha	Lord of the sacred herb
Sundaramurti	The handsome one
Tripurantaka	Slayer of the demons of the three cities
Tryambaka	The three-eyed one
Vaidya	Keeper of the Vedas; the physician
Vaidyanatha	Lord of physicians

Veda-Purusha	The Supreme personality of the Vedas
Vireshvara	Lord of martial arts
Virupaksha	The odd-eyed one
Vishveshvara	Lord of the cosmos
Visvanatha	Lord of the universe

APPENDIX THREE

Names of Other Characters in the Hindu Pantheon

Achala	Parvati; the immovable one
Adishesha	Serpent couch of Lord Narayana
Aditi	Mother of the gods
Agastya	Sage
Agni	God of fire
Agniswara	Devotee of Siva; guardian of the Southeast quarter
Ananga	Kama
Anasuya	Wife of Atri
Andhaka	Blind son of demon Hiranyaksha
Angiras	One of the seven celestial sages
Aniruddha	Lord Krishna's grandson
Annapurna	Manifestation of Parvati; giver of food
Aparna: Parvati	One who subsisted on dry leaves
Arundhati	Wife of sage Vasishta
Asikni	Wife of Daksha
Atri	A sage
Bana	Demon

Bali	Demon
Bhadra	One of the nine Durgas
Bhadrakaali	Destructive aspect of the goddess
Bhasmaka	Demon
Bhavani	Parvati, eternal transformation
Brahma	One of the trinity; the Creator
Brighu	One of the seven celestial sages
Brihaspati	Preceptor of the gods
Buddhi	Wife of Ganesha
Chamunda	One of the nine Durgas
Chandra	Moon
Dadichi	A sage
Daksha	Father of Sati
Dakshayani	Sati, daughter of Daksha
Dambha	Demon
Dasaratha	Father of Rama
Dattatreya	Son of Atri; manifestation of Vishnu
Devasenapati	Kartikeya, general of the army of the gods
Devayani	Kartikeya's wife; daughter of Indra
Dhanwantari	Father of the science of *ayurveda*
Dhanya	Daughter of the *manes*
Dharma Shasta	Avatar of both Vishnu and Shiva
Diti	Mother of the demons
Draupadi	Wife of the five Pandava brothers
Durga	Parvati
Durvasa	Son of Atri; manifestation of Shiva
Ettumba	Demon
Ganapathy	Ganesha, Lord of the *ganas*

Ganesha	Son of Shiva; elephant god
Ganga	The river; wife of Shiva
Garuda	Vishnu's eagle vehicle
Gauri	Parvati; the radiant one
Gayatri	Mother of the Vedas
Guha	Kartikeya; the secret one
Hari	Manifestation of Vishnu
Himavan	King of the Himalayas
Hiranyakashipu	Demon, brother of Hiranyaksha
Hiranyaksha	Demon
Indra	King of the gods
Isani	One of the nine Durgas
Jalandara	Demon
Janaka	Father of Sita
Jaya	Parvati's maid
Kaali	Goddess of destruction
Kala Bhairava	Fierce manifestation of Shiva
Kalanemi	Demon
Kalavati	Daughter of the *manes*
Kama	God of love
Kamadhenu	Heavenly cow
Kamakshi	Goddess of the beautiful eyes
Kamalaksha	Son of Taraka
Kapila	A great sage who immolates the hundred sons of King Sagara
Kardama	One of the patriarchs
Kartikeya	Shiva's son; son of the Krittikas
Kartyayani	One of the nine Durgas

Kashyapa	A sage
Kratu	One of the seven celestial sages
Krishna	Incarnation of Vishnu
Krittikas	The constellation Pleides; foster mothers to Kartikeya
Kshema	Ganesha's son by his wife Buddhi
Kubera	Lord of wealth
Kumara	Kartikeya; young boy
Kumuda	Son of the serpents
Kurmavatara	Vishnu's incarnation as a giant tortoise
Labha	Ganesha's son by Siddhi
Lakshmana	Brother of Rama
Lakshmi	Wife of Vishnu; goddess of wealth
Mahakali	One of the nine Durgas
Manibhadra	One of Shiva's *ganas*
Manmatha	God of love, Kama
Marichi	One of the seven celestial sages
Mayan	Architect of the demons
Medatithi	A sage
Meenakshi	Three-breasted Tamil princess; an avatar of Parvati
Mena	Wife of Himavan; mother of Parvati
Mohini	Female avatar Vishnu who tricks the *asuras* into giving the elixir of immortality to the *devas*
Mundamardini	One of the nine Durgas
Muruga	Kartikeya
Nandi	Bull vehicle of Shiva

Nandiswara	Bull vehicle of Shiva
Nora	An incarnation of Vishnu
Narada	The celestial sage who roamed the world singing the praises of Vishnu; he is known for meddling
Narasimha	Fierce man-lion avatar of Vishnu
Narayana	Vishnu; he who sleeps on the cosmic waters
Nishumba	Demon
Parvati	Wife of Shiva; daughter of the mountains
Pavakatmaja	Kartikeya; son of fire
Pradyumna	Son of Krishna
Prahlada	Son of Hiranyakashipu
Pralamba	Demon
Pulaha	One of the seven celestial sages
Punjikasthali	Heavenly dancer
Punyahshi	An earthly avatar of Parvati
Radha	Krishna's childhood sweetheart
Rama	*Avatara* of Vishnu
Rati	Kama's wife
Ravana	King of *rakshasas;* king of Sri Lanka
Rohini	Wife of Chandra
Sanaka	One of the four boy sages
Sanandana	One of the four boy sages
Sanatana	One of the four boy sages
Sanatkumara	One of the four boy sages
Sandhya	Brahma's first creation; twilight
Sarabhu	Name of Kartikeya; born among reeds
Saraswati	Wife of Brahma; goddess of learning

Sati	Shiva's first wife
Savitri	Glory of the sun; goddess of *siddhis*
Shakti	The active power of the Lord
Shankachuda	Demon
Shanmukha	Kartikeya; having six faces
Shatarupa	The first woman; wife of Swayambhu Manu
Shivaa	Shiva's consort; Parvati
Shukra	Preceptor of the demons
Shumba	Demon
Siddhi	Wife of Ganesha
Sita	Wife of Rama
Soma	Moon; sacred herb used in *yajnas*
Sradha	Wife of the *manes*
Sri Hari	Incarnation of Vishnu
Subramanya	Kartikeya
Sudama	Friend of Krishna
Svetavaraha	Incarnation of Vishnu as the white boar
Swayambhu Manu	The first man
Taraka	Demon
Tarakaksha	Son of Taraka
Tulasi	Wife of Shankachuda; the sacred basil plant
Twarita	One of the nine Durgas
Ucchaisravas	White horse given to the demon Bali
Uma	Parvati; literally translates as "do not go"
Vaaruni	Goddess of intoxication
Vaishnavi	One of the nine Durgas
Vajranga	Demon
Valli	Kartikeya's wife

Vamana	Avatar of Vishnu
Varangi	Vajranga's wife
Varuna	King of the waters
Vasanta	Spring
Vasishta	Sage; preceptor of the royal house of the solar dynasty
Vasuki	Serpent used as a rope to churn the milky ocean
Vayu	Wind god
Velayudha	Kartikeya; one who carries the *vel* as his weapon
Vidyunmali	Son of Taraka
Vigneshwara	Ganesha; remover of obstacles
Vijaya	Parvati's maid
Vinayaka	Ganesha
Virabhadra	Manifestation of Shiva
Virini	Wife of Daksha
Vishnu	One of the trinity; the harmonizer
Vishwarupa	One of the patriarchs
Visvakarma	Architect of the gods
Visvamitra	A sage
Vrinda	Wife of Jalandara
Vrishabhanu	Radha's father
Vyasa	Author of the Mahabharata and all the Puranas
Yama	God of death

APPENDIX FOUR

Alphabetical List of *Mantras*

The *mantras* that open and close every chapter of this book have been listed here in alphabetical order to facilitate location of their translations.

Ambikanathaya Namaha!	Salutations to the Lord of Ambika
Anaghaya Namaha!	Salutations to the one without a blemish
Anantaya Namaha!	Salutations to the one without an end
Bhaktavalsalaya Namaha!	Salutations to the one who is kind to devotees
Bhoothapathaye Namaha!	Salutations to the Lord of all creatures
Devaya Namaha!	Salutations to God
Ganeshaya Namaha!	Salutations to Sri Ganesha
Gangadaraya Namaha!	Salutations to the one who carries the Ganga
Giripriyaya Namaha!	Salutations to the lover of mountains
Haraya Namaha!	Salutations to the one who takes away (sins, minds)

Jagatgurave Namaha!	Salutations to the preceptor of the world
Jagatpitre Namaha!	Salutations to the father of the world
Kamaraye Namaha!	Salutations to the enemy of Kama
Kapardine Namaha!	Salutations to the one who ties his hair in the form of a conch
Kripanidaye Namaha!	Salutations to the one who is a storehouse of compassion
Laladakshaya Namaha!	Salutations to the one with an eye on his forehead
Mahadevaya Namaha!	Salutations to the great God
Maheshwaraya Namaha!	Salutations to the great Lord
Mrityunjayaya Namaha!	Salutations to the conqueror of death
Namashivaya!	Salutations to Lord Shiva. The five-syllabled *mantra* of Shiva
Neelakandaya Namaha!	Salutations to the one with a blue neck
Panchavaktraya Namaha!	Salutations to the five-faced one
Pinakine Namaha!	Salutations to the wielder of the bow Pinaka
Rudraya Namaha!	Salutations to the wild avenger
Sadashivaya Namaha!	Salutations to the ever-auspicious one
Shambave Namaha!	Salutations to the one who grants prosperity
Shankaraya Namaha!	Salutations to the one who confers happiness
Sharvaya Namaha!	Salutations to the cosmic archer

Shashishekaraya Namaha!	Salutations to the one who wears the moon on his head
Shaswathaya Namaha!	Salutations to the one who is eternal
Shivaapriyaya Namaha!	Salutations to the beloved Parvati
Shivaya Namaha!	Salutations to Lord Shiva
Shoolapanaye Namaha!	Salutations to the one who carries a trident
Somaya Namaha!	Salutations to the guardian of the sacred herb—Soma
Sookshmathanaye Namaha!	Salutations to the one with a subtle body
Sri Gurave Namaha!	Salutations to the guru
Srikandaya Namaha!	Salutations to the one with a beautiful neck
Tripurantakaya Namaha!	Salutations to the Destroyer of the three cities
Viroopakshaya Namaha!	Salutations to the odd-eyed one
Vishveshvaraya Namaha!	Salutations to the Lord of the universe

APPENDIX FIVE

Vedic Invocations for World Peace

Aum sarvesham swasthir bhavathu,
Sarvesham shantir bhavathu,
Sarvesham poornam bhavathu,
Sarvesham mangalam bhavathu.
Sarve bhavanthu sukhinaha,
Sarve santhu niramayaha
Sarve bhadrani pashyantu,
Makaschid dukhabav bhaveth

Let everyone be healthy,
Let everyone enjoy peace,
Let everyone live in fulfillment,
Let everyone be filled with auspiciousness,
Let all be happy,
Let all be free from pain,
Let all see only auspiciousness,
Let not anyone be unhappy.

Mundaka Upanishad

Aurn asato ma sad gamaya
Tamaso ma jyotir gamaya
Mrityor ma amritam gamaya.

From the unreal lead me to the Real,
From darkness lead me to light,
From death lead me to immortality.

Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

Aum Poornamadam poornamidam,
Poornath poornamudachyathe,
Poornasya, Poornamadaya,
Poornamevavashishyathe.
Aum Shanti, Shanti, Shanti!

That is full and this is also full,
From the full comes the full.
From the full if you take away the full,
Fullness alone will remain.
Aum Peace! Peace! Peace!

Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

Glossary of Sanskrit Terms

abhijit: Propitious time
abhisheka: Ritualistic bathing of an idol or a king
achala: Immovable, constant
adharma: Unrighteousness
adishesha: Serpent bed of Narayana
advaita: Nonduality
advaitic: Pertaining to *advaita*
aham brahmasmi: I am Brahman; Vedic *mantra*
ahamkara: Ego
ahimsa: Nonviolence
Airavata: Mythological white elephant; vehicle of India
ajna chakra: Spiritual center between the brows
akasha: Ether
amrita: Nectar of immortality
anahata chakra: Heart *chakra*
ananda: Bliss
apana: The downward breath, exhalation
apas: Water
apsara: Celestial dancer
arati: Waving of lights before a deity
ardhra: A star
ashrama: Hermitage

ashtakam: A type of poem written in eight stanzas
asura: Demon
asuric: Demonic
Asvini: Name of month—September/October
aswamedha yaga: Horse sacrifice
Atharvana Veda: The fourth Veda
atma: Soul
atman: Self
atmic: Pertaining to the soul; undifferentiated awareness, identification with all life
aum: *Mantra* denoting the Supreme
avatara: Divine incarnations who are born with full knowledge of their powers
avidya: Ignorance
avyaktha: Unmanifest

bel: A type of leaf used in Shiva's worship
Bhadra: Name of month—August/September
Bhagavan: God
bhakta: Devotee
bhakti: Devotion
bhang: A cannabis preparation
bhasma: Ashes
bhavana: Attitude
bhiksha: Food gotten by begging
bhikshu: One who begs for food
bhoga: Path of pleasure
bhogi: One who lives to eat
bhutas: Five gross elements; spirits
bindu: A dot
brahmachari: A celibate
brahmastra: Very powerful atomic weapon
brahmin: Member of the priest caste

Chaitra: Name of a month—February/March
chakora: A bird
chakra: Wheel; energy center in the body
chandrakala: Crescent moon
chaturyuga: The four epochs, or *yugas*
chidakasha: Divine creative consciousness
crore: A unit equal to 10 million

dacoit: Bandit
dakshina: Fee given for any spiritual benefit
damaru: Shiva's drum
darbha: A type of grass
darshan: Vision, auspicious sight of God
dasa: Servant
dasa marga: Way of the servant
deva: One of the lesser gods
devata: Deity, the divine consciousness manifesting in each thing
devataru: Sacred tree growing only in the higher realms of the Himalayas
Devipurana: A scripture about the Divine Mother
dharma: Eternal law of righteousness
dundhubhi: A percussion instrument

ganapatis: Leaders of the *ganas*
ganas: Assorted followers of Shiva
gandharvas: Celestial musicians
Garuda: Eagle vehicle of Lord Vishnu
ghat: Bathing steps leading into a river
gopi: Milkmaid, or woman of the *gopalas* (cowherds)
gunas: The three modes, or fundamental attributes, of nature
guru: Spiritual preceptor

halahala: A type of virulent poison

indriyas: Sense organs; five organs of knowledge and five organs of action
Iswara: God

jagat: The material world
jiva: Individual soul
jivan mukta: Liberated soul, fully illumined sage
jivatma: Embodied soul
jnana: Spiritual knowledge
jnana marga: Way of knowledge
jyotirlinga: Shrine, one of the twelve *lingas* of Shiva

kala: Art; phase
kamandalu: A water pot carried by *sannyasis* (wandering mendicants)
karma: Action
karma-mala: Impurity accruing from action
keora: A type of cactus flower
kinnaras: Celestial beings
kirata: Hunter, forest person
Krittivasa: Wearer of animal hides
kshatriya: Warrior caste
kundala: A man's earring
kundalini: The spiritual energy coiled at the base of the spine
kusa: Type of grass

lakh: Hundred thousand
lasya: The slow movements of a woman
lila: Play
linga: Rounded stone signifying Shiva; sign; token; phallus

Mahapralaya: The night of Brahma when all worlds up to the world of Brahma dissolve
mahayogi: Great yogi
mahout: Elephant keeper

malaya: Warm southern breeze
manduka: Frog
manes: Ancestors
manipura chakra: Third *chakra* at the navel
mantra: Sacred word, sound form of deities
manvantara: The lifetime of Manu, the progenitor of the human race
manvantaram: A cycle of time, eon
marga: Path; way
Margashirsha: Name of a month—December/January
maya: Cosmic illusion
maya-mala: Impurity caused by *maya*
modaka: Round sweet loved by Ganesha
mooladhara chakra: First *chakra* at base of spine
mudra: Mystic symbol made with the fingers
mukti: Liberation
mythya: Illusion

nada: Cosmic sound
nadi: Astral channel that is a conduit for psychic energy, such as *kundalini*
naga: Serpent
naimittika-pralaya: Same as *Mahapralaya*
namashivaya: Five-syllabled, sacred *mantra* of Shiva
navadurgas: The nine Durgas
nitya: Constant
nitya-brahmachari: Eternal celibate
nitya-pralaya: Dissolution of personality experienced during sleep
nritta, nrittya: Dance

omkara: Sound of *aum*

pancha bhutas: The five great elements of nature—*prithvi* (earth), *apaha* (water), *vayu* (wind), *agni* (fire), and *akasha* (limitless space)

panchakshari: Na-ma-shi-va-ya; five-syllabled *mantra* of Shiva
paramatma: The cosmic soul
pasa: Rope of bondage
pasu: Creature
pasupata: Missile of Shiva
Pati: Master
peethas: Spiritual seats
Phalguna: Name of month—February/March
pinaka: Divine bow of Shiva
pishachas: Ghouls
pitthan: Madman (Tamil word)
Prakriti: Nature
prakritika-pralaya: Total dissolution of everything, including Prakriti, into its ultimate cause—Brahman
pralaya: Dissolution; deluge
prana: Vital breath, life force
pranava mantra: *Aum*
prasad: Leftovers from offering to God
pratah sandhya: Morning twilight, dawn
pretas: Ghosts
prithvi: Earth
puja: Ritualistic worship
Purana: Scripture
Puranic: Pertaining to the Puranas

rajas: One of the gunas of nature; activity
rajasic: Passionate, lusty
rakshasa: Demon, unrighteous spirit
Rbhus: A type of powerful spirit
Rig Veda: One of the four Vedas
Rishis: Saints, sages
rudraksha: Seed of a tree loved by Shiva

rudravina: Type of lute designed by Ravana
Rudri: Hymn to Shiva in the *Yajur Veda;* short for Sri Rudrum

sadhana: Spiritual practice
sadhu: Holy man
sahasrara: The seventh *chakra,* at the crown of the head
sakhya marga: Way of friendship
saligrama: A round stone typifying Vishnu found in the Gantaki river in Nepal and sometimes in the Narmada River
salokya: Staying in god's world (the god you normally worship)
Sama Veda: One of the four Vedas, which is normally sung and not chanted
samadhi: Superconscious state
samhara: Destruction
samipya: Staying near to god (the god you are devoted to)
samsara: Transmigratory (human) existence
sandhya: Twilight
Sankhya: One of the six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy, which regards the universe as consisting of two realities, Purusha and Prakriti
saras: Type of grass
sarupya: Having the form of god (the god you normally worship)
sastra: Rules, knowledge based on timeless principles
satchidananda: Existence-consciousness-bliss; definition of Brahman
satputra marga: Path of the good son
sattva: Harmony; essence; goodness; one of the *gunas*
sattvic: Pertaining to *sattva*
Satyaloka: The highest heaven
sayujya: Entering into the godhead
Shakti: Force or energy of the goddess
shastras: Scriptures
shrishti: Creation
shyama sandhya: Evening twilight
siddha: One with supernormal powers

siddhis: Supernormal powers, eight in number
soma: Sacred herb
sthithaprajna: Person of firm intellect; name given in the *Bhagavad Gita* for the enlightened soul
sthiti: Preservation
stotram: Hymn addressed to a divinity
Sudarshana Chakra: The wheel of time; Vishnu's weapon
sushumna: Astral channel, or *nadi*, that runs along the spinal column
swadhisthana: Second *chakra*
tamas: Darkness, inertia, lethargy; third *guna*
tamasic: Pertaining to *tamas*
tanmatras: Subtle energy underlying the elements
Tantras: Esoteric scriptures
Tantrik: One who follows the Tantra tradition
tapasya: Spiritual force acquired by the practice of austerities, including meditation, for gaining spiritual and material powers
tarakamudra: Position of the fingers when the tip of the forefinger touches the tip of the thumb
tat twam asi: Vedic *mantra;* that thou art
tatanka: Earring worn by a woman
tattvas: Elements of reality, twenty-four in number; tangible aspects of creation
tejas: Glory
thandava nritta: Cosmic dance of Shiva
thevaram: Songs to Lord Shiva
Trimurtis: The trinity; three forms of God—Brahma the creator, Vishnu the sustainer, and Shiva the Destroyer

udana: Upward moving air, a part of the five vital breaths
upanayanam: Ceremony of the investiture of the sacred thread
Upanishads: Last portion of the Vedas dealing with the philosophy of *advaita*
urdhva-thandava: Shiva's cosmic dance in which one foot is raised vertically beside the ear

vairagya: Detachment

vajra: Thunderbolt

vanamala: Garland of Vishnu

vayu: Wind

Vedanta: A synonym for the part of the Vedas known as the Upanishads; one who has mastered all four of the original Vedas

Veda-Purusha: Lord of the Vedas, which is the Brahman itself

Vedas: Earliest spiritual scripture of the Hindu religion; four in number

vel: Javelin, spear

vidya: Knowledge

vishuddhi chakra: *Chakra* at the base of the throat

yaga: Fire sacrifice

yajna: Sacrifices; same as *yaga*

yajnashala: Place where the *yaga/yajna* is performed

Yajur Veda: One of the four Vedas

yaksha: Demigods; guardians of the treasures of the netherworld

yantra: A mystical geometrical diagram

yoga: Any activity that leads to union with the supreme

yoga-maya: Lord's power of illusion

yogi: One who practices yoga; one who is in union with God

yogini: A female yogi

yoni: Seat; base; vulva; the base of the *linga*

yuga: Epoch

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Shiva, the most ancient and complex deity of the Hindu pantheon, has been portrayed in many contrasting lights: destroyer and benefactor, ascetic and householder, wild demon slayer and calm yogi atop Mount Kailash. Drawing from the Hindu sacred text the *Shiva Mahapurana*—said to be written by Shiva himself—Vanamali selects the essential stories of Shiva, both those from his dark wild side and those from his benevolent peaceful side.

Vanamali discusses Shiva's many avatars such as Shambunatha and Bhola as well as Dakshinamurthy, who taught the Shastras and Tantras to the rishis. She explores Shiva's relationships with Durga, Shakti, Sati, and Parvati and with his sons Ganesha and Kartikeya. Examining Shiva's acceptance of outsiders, Vanamali explains why ghosts and ghouls are his attendants and why his greatest devotees are demon kings, like Ravana. She includes famous Shiva stories such as the Descent of the River Ganga and Churning the Milky Ocean as well as those that reveal the origin of Diwali, the festival of lights; his creation of the cosmic couple, or hieros gamos; and how Shiva and Parvati taught the world the secrets of Kundalini Shakti. The author also draws upon Shaivite teachings to illustrate the differences between Western science and Vedic science and their explanations for the origins of consciousness.

Integrating Shiva's two sides, the fierce and the peaceful, Vanamali reveals that Shiva's form depends on the needs of the devotee. Understanding his teachings allows one to see through the illusions at the root of all grief and alienation in human life, for Shiva is the wielder of *maya* who does not fall under its spell. While Ganesha is known as the remover of obstacles, Shiva is the remover of tears.

MATAJI DEVI VANAMALI has written 7 books on the gods of the Hindu pantheon, including *Shakti, Hanuman,* and *The Complete Life of Krishna,* as well as translating the Bhagavad Gita. She is the founder and president of Vanamali Gita Yoga Ashram Trust, dedicated to sharing the wisdom of Sanatana Dharma and charitable service to children. She lives at the Vanamali ashram in Rishikesh, northern India.

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